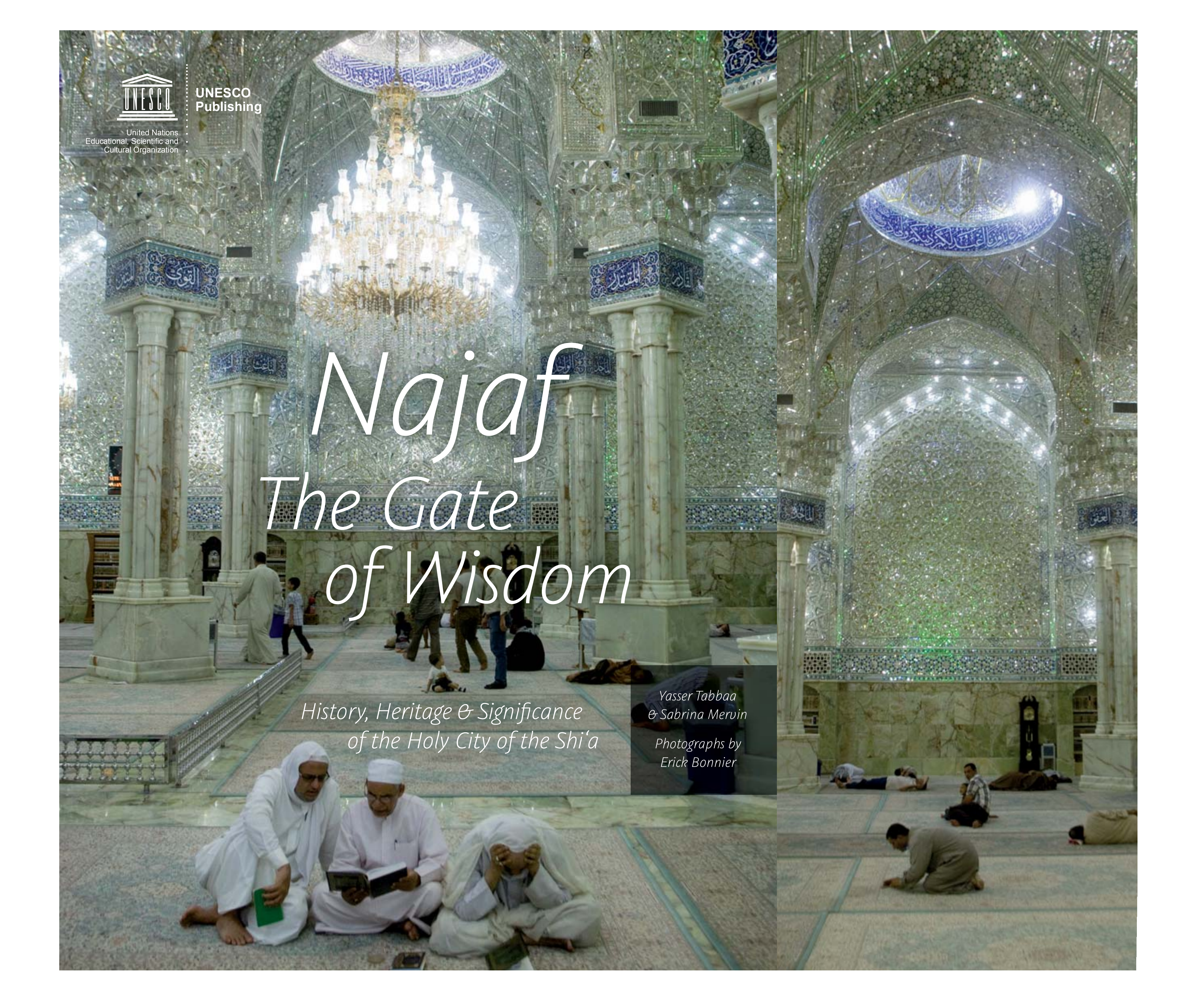
Najaf, The Gate of Wisdom. History, Heritage and Significance of the Holy City of the Shi'a

Sabrina Mervin, Yasser Tabbaa, Erick Bonnier (photographs)


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United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

With the support of



Republic of Iraq
Ministry of Culture

Published in 2014 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 7 place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France, and the UNESCO Office for Iraq, Abdoun, 9 Ya'acoub Ammari Street, P.O. Box 2270, Amman, Jordan 11181.

ISBN 978-92-3-100028-7



Cover photo: Grandiose mirror mosaics at Al-Ra's Mosque (shrine of Imam 'Ali, Najaf), © Erick Bonnier
All photographs © Erick Bonnier
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Graphic design: Corinne Hayworth
Printed for UNESCO by Imprimerie Centrale

Printed in Luxembourg



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Publishing

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Contents

Foreword

Najaf is a sacred place with layers of important spiritual, cultural, social and historical values that have been built up over time. The presence of Imam ʻAli's tomb has for centuries endowed the city with a unique spiritual significance for the Shiʻi denomination of Islam. The presence of the holy shrine has drawn pilgrims from throughout the Islamic world, while the sanctity of the imam has fostered the development of the cemetery of Wadi al-Salam, today one of the largest in the world. The city has also been the most prominent centre of Shiʻi religious teaching since the eleventh century CE, and has become the seat of the supreme authority guiding the community of believers.

The spiritual and educational importance of Najaf has been made material in the city's monuments and urban pattern. The shrine of Imam ʻAli, originally erected in the eighth century CE, was the object of numerous renovation and rebuilding phases, and is currently undergoing a major extension. Its golden dome and minarets have dominated the cityscape since the eighteenth century CE. The shrine not only provided the centre of Najaf but also contributed to the city's spacial, social and functional divisions into neighbourhoods of courtyard-centred houses dotted with markets, mosques, shrines, *madrasas* and libraries.

The role Najaf plays as a strong root of Shiʻi identity is at the very core of the concept of cultural heritage. Yet like many other cities in the developing world, Najaf is faced today with problems of demographic growth, service and infrastructure development, physical conservation, internal equilibrium and functioning. These pressing issues are compounded by the millions of pilgrims who visit annually and require services, and by the ever-increasing demand on burial space. Najaf has to find a balance between the conservation and rehabilitation of its architectural heritage and traditional urban fabric, and the well-being of its inhabitants and visitors. The old city, the shrine of Imam ʻAli and the cemetery of Wadi al-Salam are bound by deep ties that could be a powerful model of social, economic and urban development, allowing for the preservation of the city's built heritage and identity.

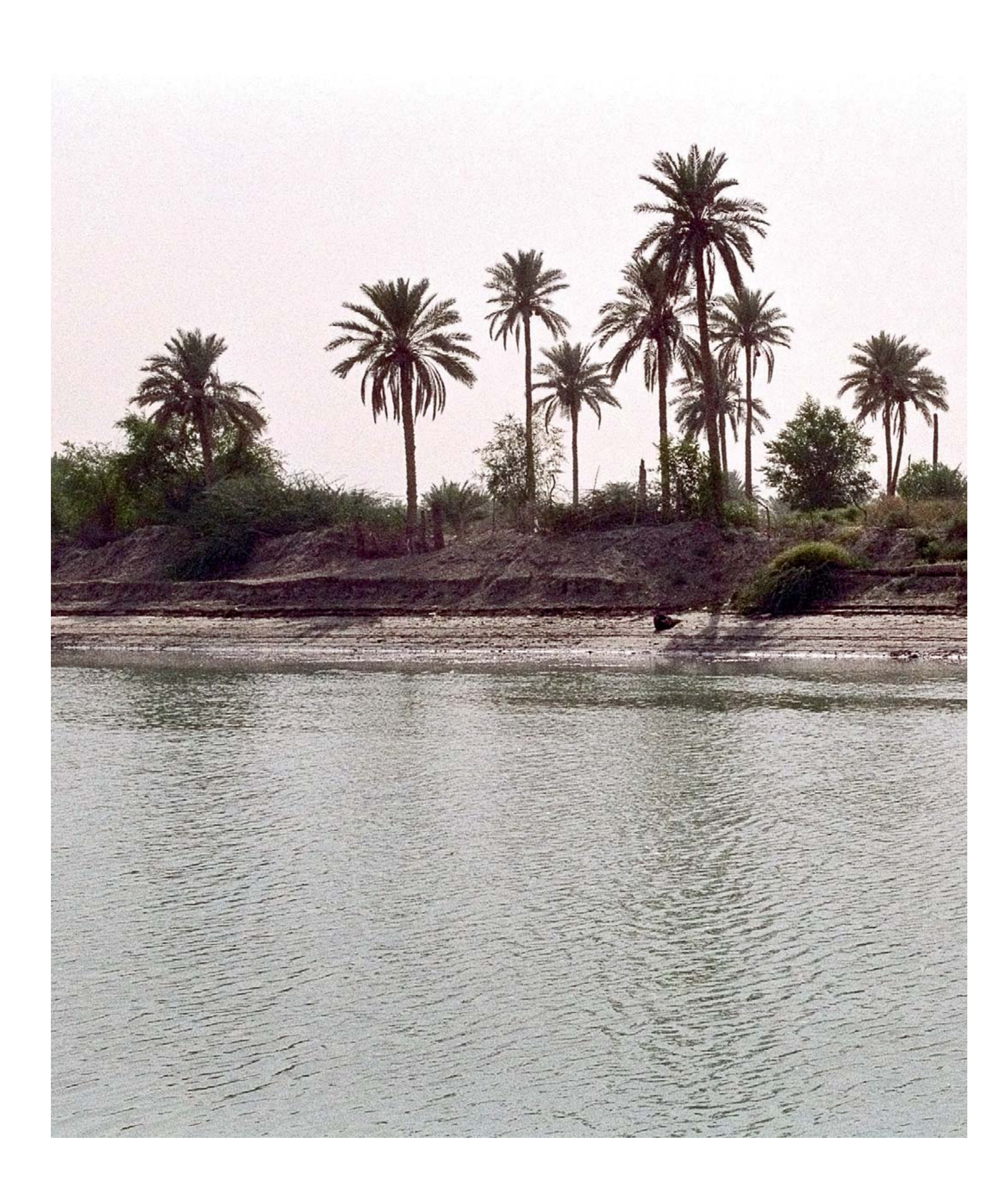
The preservation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage is central to the mission of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). For over half a century, UNESCO has endeavoured to link the restoration of monuments to the revitalization of historic urban centres. The primary challenge in conserving sacred places is to address the intangible values that they represent both for the local population and for outside visitors. Preserving the visible character of the place for its inhabitants, the pilgrims who seek to connect with the divine, and the lay visitors alike contributes to maintaining a collective identity and the universal value of a sacred place.

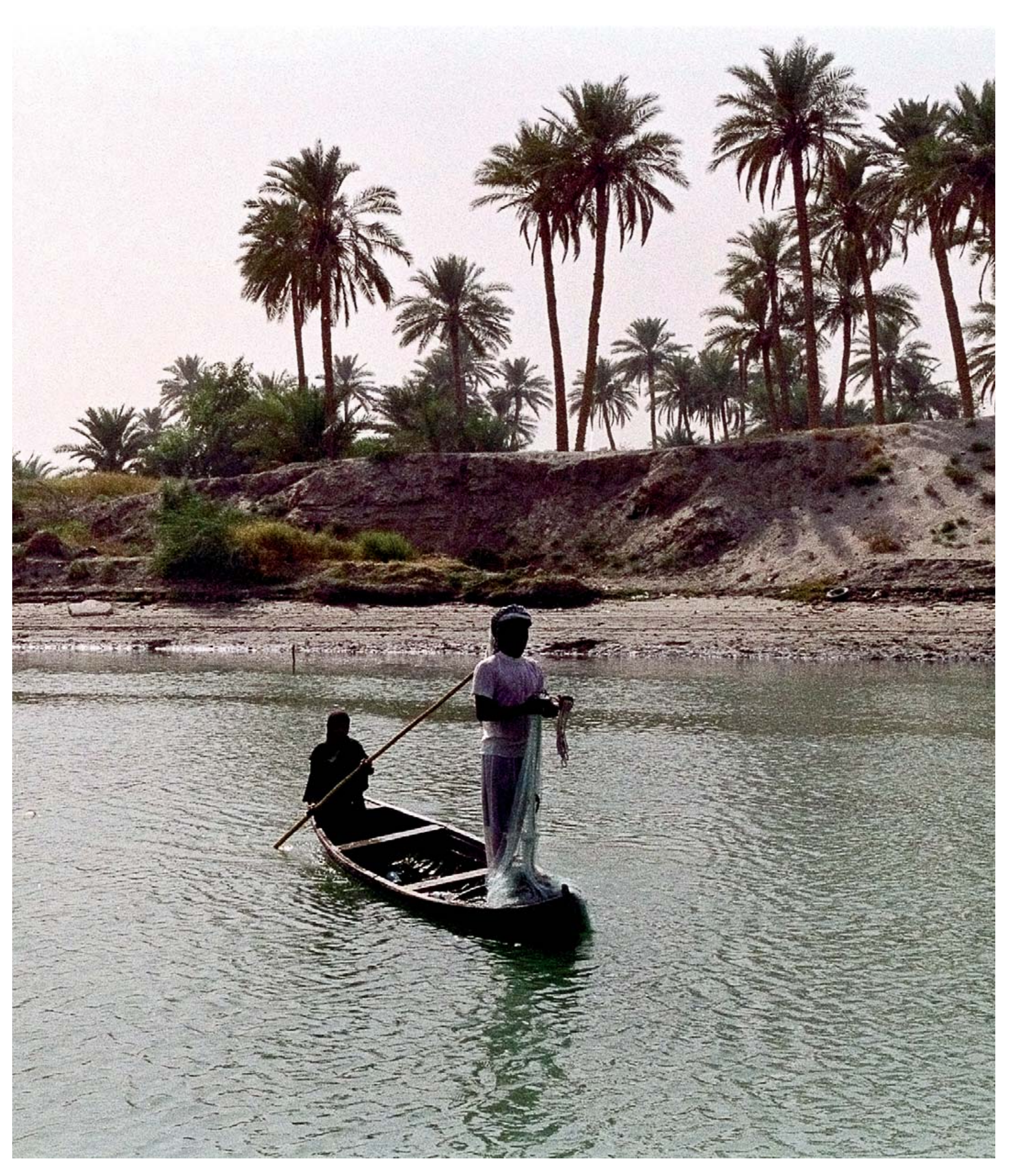
This book, made possible thanks to a partnership between the Iraqi Ministry of Culture and UNESCO, is written by Yasser Tabbaa and Sabrina Mervin, two prominent scholars of Islamic art and contemporary Shiʻism respectively. It is beautifully illustrated with photographs by Erick Bonnier. The book is first and foremost a tribute to the heritage and significance of Najaf. It is also a contribution to help Najaf maintain its identity and safeguard its unique role for millions of believers.

Axel Plathe
Director, UNESCO Office for Iraq

Acknowledgements

Yasser Tabbaa, Sabrina Mervin and Erick Bonnier would like to thank the Iraqi Ministry of Culture and the UNESCO Office for Iraq for giving them the opportunity to work on this book and perfect their knowledge of Najaf, its history, heritage and people. They would like to express their gratitude to all those who facilitated their stays in the city, generously shared their time and knowledge, helped with gaining access to places and people, and invited them to their houses in the tradition of the famed Najafi hospitality. Rashid Jabbar al-Hasani and Géraldine Chatelard deserve a special mention for their dedication to the project. The administrative council of the Holy Shrine of Imam 'Ali, the Amir al-Mu'minin Library and the Al Kashif al-Ghita' Foundation were also particularly supportive. Sabrina Mervin would further like to thank David Tresilian for translating her contribution from French to English.





A fishing couple navigate the shallow waters of the Euphrates, near Kufa.

Introduction

Najaf is a city of profound memories – collective, familial, and personal – whose constant projection upon the present creates a remarkable continuum of time. The most sublime of these memories are of Imam ʻAli, who occupies the physical, spiritual and ritual heart of Najaf, and radiates his bliss upon all its inhabitants and visitors. His unique example of bravery and knowledge guides the believers towards the pursuit of learning, and the belief in his God-given intercession has led millions of Muslims to be buried in the cemetery attached to his name, Wadi al-Salam.

In a casual conversation, Dr Salah Mahdi al-Fartusi, a Najafi scholar of literature and history, outlined what he considered to be the distinctive features of his city. First of all, it is a commemorative place: it is the burial place of Imam ʻAli and other ancient prophets and patriarchs. It is a religious centre: it is the nexus of Shiʻi piety and pilgrimage. It is an educational centre: it possesses a major *hawza* or theological seminary. It has authoritative importance: it is one of the main *marjaʻiyyas* (religious authorities) of Shiʻism. And it has funerary importance too: it contains the cemetery of Wadi al-Salam, possibly the largest cemetery in the world. As a result, Najaf, including its various institutions and persons, interpenetrates with Shiʻi and even some Sunni Muslims throughout their lives and even into their final rest. Indeed, for Shiʻism the importance of Najaf is on a par with that of the Vatican for Roman Catholics, with an added funerary role.

Curiously, Najaf is little known among the educated but not specialized Western public, whether as a city, a pilgrimage site, a centre of learning, or for its enormous cemetery. This book is intended as one step in introducing Najaf in all its glory to the educated lay public who are interested in the history, culture and religion of Iraq and the Middle East without being specialists in any of these fields. In it we hope the non-Muslim Western reader will find a concise, clear and even-handed guide to the various dimensions that constitute Najaf, historically and as a living city. Furthermore, it should be noted that the book engages with some of the rich regional scholarship on Najaf, drawing on both written research, and discussions and interviews with Najafi scholars, clerics and artisans. It is our hope that Iraqi and Muslim readers will equally find some benefit in it.

This introductory book does not assume any prior knowledge of Islam, Shiʻism, Iraq or Najaf, and it deals with some issues that have not been of great interest to Iraqi scholars, such as urbanism and architecture. The book also addresses some unfounded assumptions and negative images related to our topics of discussion, some of which may have reached the lay reader through newspapers or websites of questionable reliability. It follows then that this book has a twofold mission: to lay a common foundation for understanding the basic historical and religious concepts about the city and culture of Najaf; and to present in a clear and straightforward manner the singularity, beauty and charisma of the city.

Methodologically, the book adopts a multidisciplinary approach, which addresses its complex case study from the viewpoints of history, demography, architectural history, anthropology and of course photography. It begins by introducing Najaf's topography, history and urban character, before proceeding to expand on its religious architecture, the rites and rituals of its visitation, its penchant for the pursuit of knowledge, and the rites and rituals of burial at the Wadi al-Salam cemetery.

Chapter 1 examines the topography and history of the Najaf–Kufa region, placing the sister cities in the context of Iraq, the Euphrates River, the desert and the Bahr al-Najaf, a wetland extending to the west of Najaf. Historically, it surveys the history of Najaf from its early Islamic origins to contemporary times, passing through its Safavid, Ottoman and Qajar phases, its subjugation to the British Mandate, and its role in Iraqi Independence.

Chapter 2 examines Najaf as an urban organism, including its traditional premodern plan and vernacular architecture, its commercial centre and ancillary markets, and more briefly, its modern and recent transformations.

The remaining chapters – 3 to 6 – discuss the various visual, ritual, educational and mortuary experiences of pilgrims to Najaf. Chapter 3 examines the architectural history and aesthetic significance of the shrine of Imam 'Ali, and other important shrines and mosques in Najaf and Kufa, highlighting their pristine regularity and immersive ornament, and their recent rebuilding in a most extravagant style. Chapter 4, written by Sabrina Mervin, examines Najaf as a city of learning and culture, focusing on its world-renowned *hawza* (theological seminary) and *marja'iyya* (religious authorities). Chapter 5 discusses the rituals and ceremonies practised by pilgrims to Najaf, and highlights the role of public and private charity in facilitating the visit and the ritual practices. Chapter 6 deals with the cemetery of Wadi al-Salam, discussing its history and basic structure, and examining the various ritual requirements of burial, visitation, mourning and charity. The exceptional efforts undertaken by Najafi scholars and librarians to preserve invaluable manuscript collections are further illustrated by the insightful afterword written by Marco Di Bella, a UNESCO expert in book and manuscript conservation.

The book, particularly in its last four chapters, is enriched and enlivened by interspersed sidebars, all but one written by Sabrina Mervin, that highlight significant and quite captivating traditional professions in Najaf, including food preparers, book sellers, ring makers, tailors of cloaks and headdresses, and undertakers who prepare dead bodies for burial. All of these sidebars represent, in addition to book research, a first-hand engagement with the craftspeople and artisans whose presence in bazaars gives Najaf its local colour and special character, and links it with history.

The text is written by Yasser Tabbaa, in collaboration with Sabrina Mervin, and is illustrated by Erick Bonnier, a photographer of international renown. The writers travelled together with the photographer, and their vision for this book – textual and visual – has been informed by this collaboration. The reader will undoubtedly note the great attention paid to the visual dimension of Najaf, brilliantly accomplished by Bonnier, whose photographs not only illustrate the book, but provide their own narrative of light, colour, shape, texture and form. This is not only because this is a book intended for a general audience, but because Najaf – with its shrines, mosques, libraries and markets – calls for such a treatment.

Although a book of this nature would normally draw on secondary and tertiary sources, preferably in English, the relative dearth of such literature has mandated otherwise. Rather, the writers have had to research the book using both secondary and primary sources in Arabic, English and French. This not only created certain difficulties for the authors but is also potentially problematic for the reader who may wish to further explore any topic through accessible literature. We have attempted to remedy this situation by providing a glossary and a bibliography with the most accessible and reliable sources, but the problem of further reading remains for the non-Arabic-speaking reader, and we can only hope that this book will be one of many future books on the history and culture of Iraq.

The methodology used by some of the Arabic sources requires some discussion, as it differs quite markedly from established historical methods, a problem that must be addressed before proceeding any further. How does the academic writer reconcile arguments derived from documentary and textual evidence with conclusions that rest on sacred histories and popular beliefs? What strategies of selection, verification and analysis must be deployed in order to maintain a rational and coherent discourse while also paying due respect to ingrained beliefs and popular traditions?

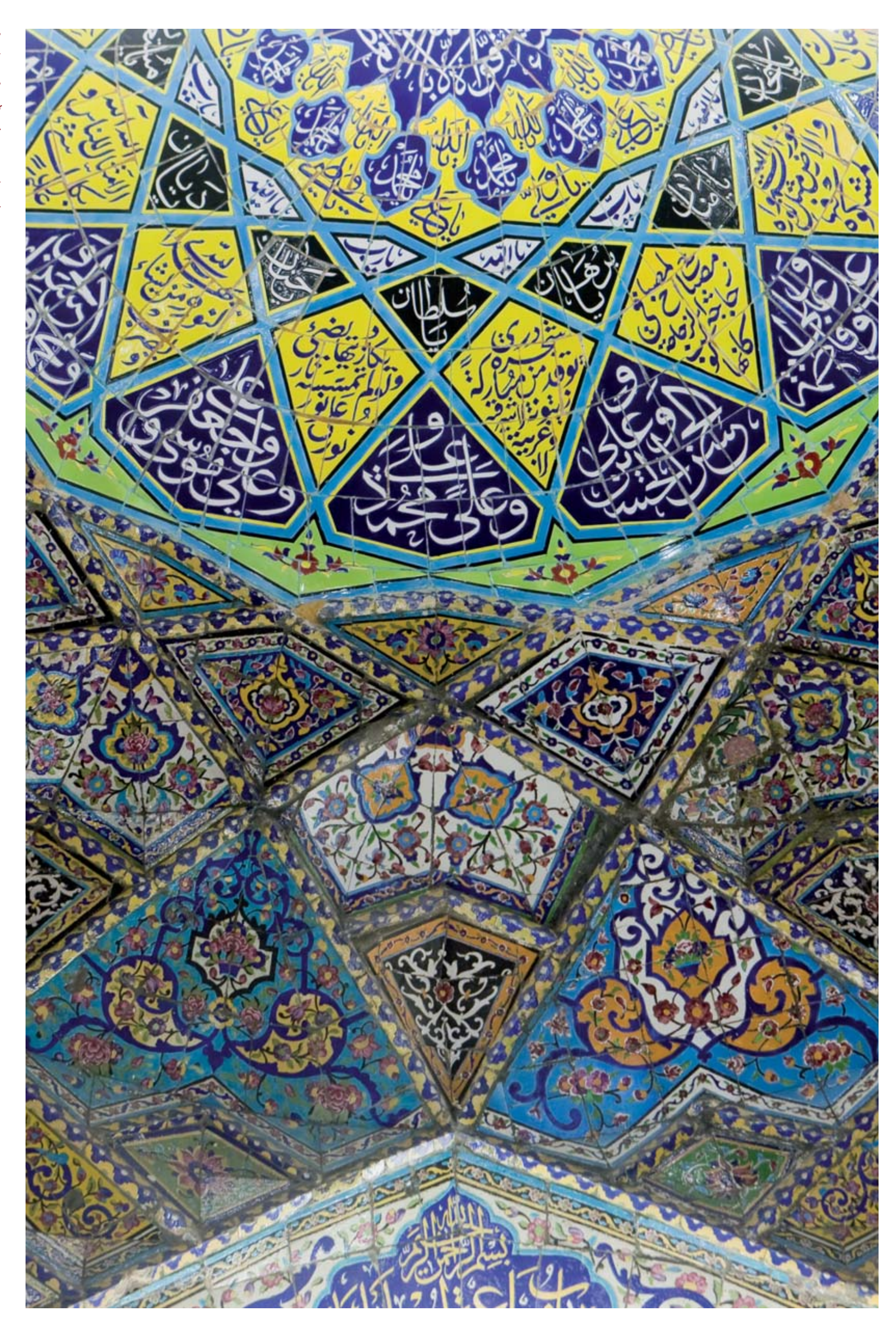
There are at least three historiographical methods and discourses that shape our understanding of the factual, sacred and populist histories of Najaf, and each of these discourses draws on different sources, logical structures, modes of interpretation, scholars and audiences.

The first and most verifiable of these historical methods is archaeology. Relying on the positive findings of archaeological research – including stratified structures, pottery sequences, inscriptions and coinage – this type of history has been widely practised in Iraq, particularly for its ancient sites, although some Arab and Islamic sites – including Hira, Kufa, Wasit and Basra – have also been investigated in this manner. For Kufa in particular, the excavations of D. T. Rice and Fuad Safar, and the studies of K. A. C. Creswell, stand out, giving us the topography and historical phases of the site, and a thorough description and analysis of its main monuments.

The second and most common historical methodology utilizes primary textual documents and secondary sources, including chronicles, biographical dictionaries, travel literature and interviews. Although they are largely based on secondary sources, which are less verifiable than archaeological and documentary sources, a careful and comparative assessment of these narratives, particularly when tested against documentary evidence, can produce a rich, lively and quite accessible history. Indeed, most current and accepted histories of the premodern Islamic world are based to large though varying degrees on narrative, documentary and archaeological sources.

The third mode of discourse that informs our subject could be termed 'sacred history', a genre that is widely practised among some traditional Muslim scholars in Iraq and elsewhere. This brand of historical writing has its own sources, methodologies, scholars and audience, none of which coincide with the first two approaches. Generally shunning or even superseding the positive facts of archaeology and the scientific analyses of history, traditional historians of this genre align themselves closely with the sources and practices of the transmitters of *hadith*, the stories and practices of the Prophet Muhammad, vetted through the imams. Often taking the traditional form and method of a *hadith* – with an acceptable text and, more importantly, a solid recension – these historians accumulate dozens of tales that support or dispute their historical narrative, investigating their veracity more in terms of the chain of their recension (*isnad*) than with any textual or historical analysis. Furthermore, unlike the chronological limitations of the first two methods, sacred historians cover a practically infinite chronological range, going back to First Creation and forward to the Day of Judgement. Although their methodology is certainly ahistorical, it does possess an internal logic, largely dependent on the sequencing of reliable transmitters who go back directly to the Prophet or to one of the first of the twelve imams. Indeed, this is the type of history that is favoured by the lay population and even religious scholars of Najaf, who may in fact find modern historical methods dry, unsavoury and even objectionable. Without abandoning its scientific groundings, this book has whenever possible attempted to embrace the popular beliefs and sacred history that are so close to the hearts of the people of Najaf.

Finally, as the book is intended for the general reader, the authors have kept endnotes to the very minimum. For example, there are long passages of historical narration, architectural description and ritual analysis that rely on a number of key sources, which are listed in the bibliography, but not cited at every instance.



Holy shrine of Najaf. Detail of tile work featuring the names of ʿAli and the imams, as well as the names of God.





Men at a Grand Bazaar tea shop
surrounded by the portraits of renowned ulamas.


بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
ونريد أن نمن على الذين استضعفوا في الأرض ونجعلهم أئمة ونجعلهم الوارثين
الامام محمد المهدى
كنيته ابو القاسم
ولد بسامراء يوم الجمعة الخامس عشر من شهر شعبان
سنة ٢٥٥ هـ
الامام الزكي العسكري الحسن
الامام علي الهادي
الامام الجواد محمد
الامام علي الرضا
الامام الكاظم موسى
الامام جعفر الصادق



The topography & history of Najaf


0 km
150
TURKEY
Mosul
Erbil
Sulaymaniyya
Kirkuk
SYRIAN ARAB
REPUBLIC
Samarra
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC
OF IRAN
Ramadi
Baghdad
JORDAN
IRAQ
Tigris
Karbala
Kufa
Kut
Najaf
Euphrates
Nasiriyya
Basra
SAUDI ARABIA
KUWAIT
The Gulf

◤ *Detail of a genealogical tree from the archives of Amir al-Mu'minin Library in Najaf showing the line of ascent from the Sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, to the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi.*

The shrine of Imam 'Ali in Najaf, by night. ◥

Topography

In a poignant verse in the Qur'an (14:37), Abraham plaintively tells God that he had been made to dwell with his family 'in a valley without cultivation', a reference to Mecca and its arid and uncultivated valleys. Interestingly, the same remark could be made about Najaf, whose hilly terrain shares with Mecca minimal cultivation and an absence of fresh water, and a sizeable distance from a navigable body of water. Indeed, the traveller's first impression of Najaf – especially when compared with other Iraqi cities such as Mosul, Baghdad, Basra and even the nearby Kufa – is of its aridity and distance from a reliable water source, making it unsuitable as an agricultural centre or as an entrepot for riparian trade.

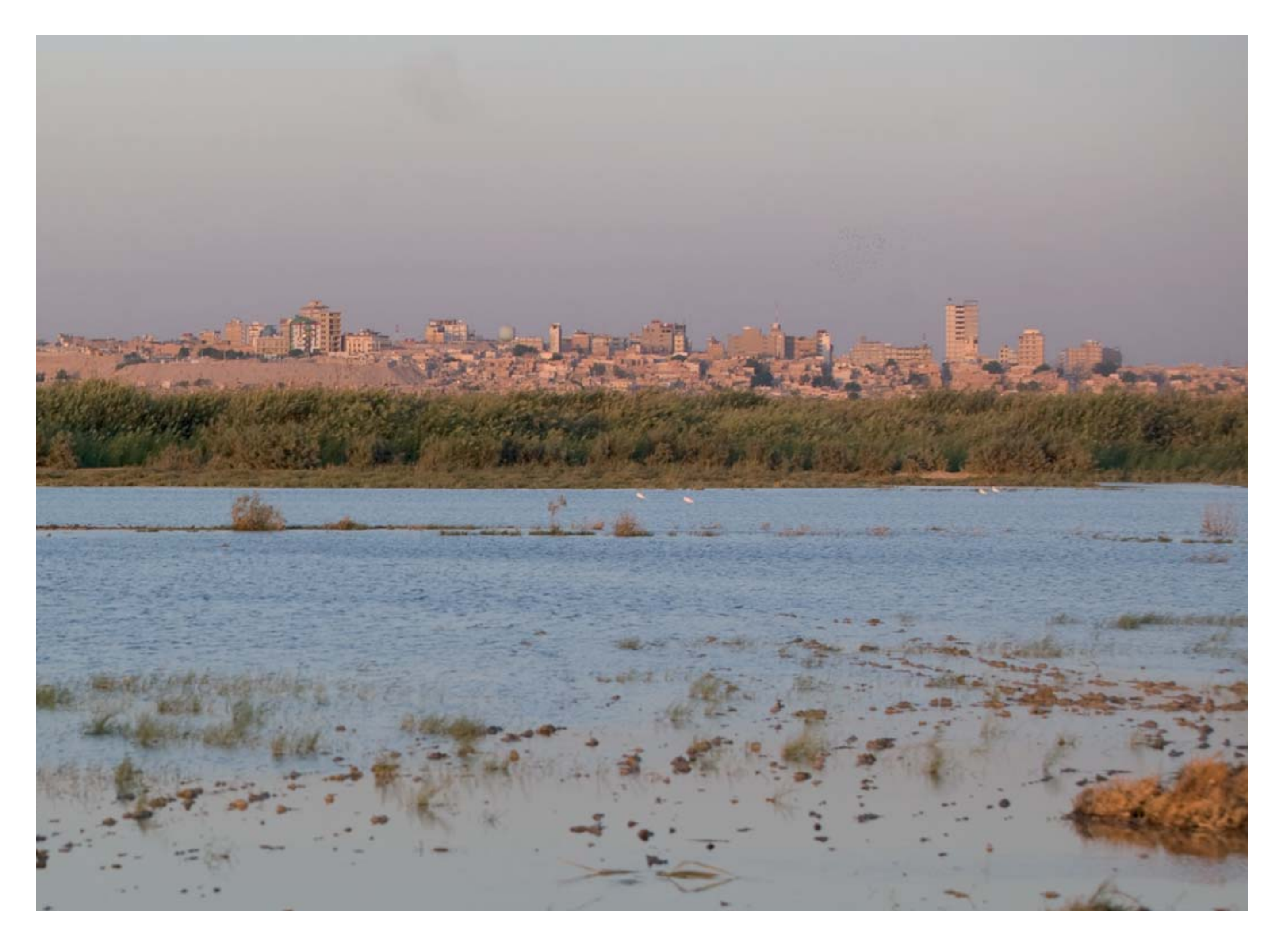
Najaf is located at the edge of the western plateau of Iraq, 160 km south of Baghdad, 360 km north of Basra, and 10 km west of Kufa and the River Euphrates. At this location, the distance separating the two great rivers of Mesopotamia, the Tigris and the Euphrates, has widened before they join waters around 300 km south-southeast to form the single river of Shatt al-'Arab. Unlike the Tigris, with its many tributaries originating in the Zagros Mountains, the Euphrates at this southern point is a somewhat smaller river that creates a green ribbon surrounded by a harsh desert landscape, the Syrian Desert to the east and the increasingly salty terrains to the west. About 200 km south of Najaf the Euphrates completely loses its course as it flows into the shallow lands that form the Marshes (*al-Ahwar*), an astonishing region of wildlife, reeds, shifting islands, and until recently dwellers in reed houses, the Marsh Arabs or *Ma'dan*. The Bahr al-Najaf, just west of Wadi al-Salam, is an early harbinger of these marshes.

Najaf is located on a slight hill, 70 m above sea level, a topographic location that might have led to its name, since according to various lexicologists *najaf* or *najafa* means an elevated platform that stands in the way of flash floods.[1] Today Najaf is loosely bordered to the west by Bahr al-Najaf, to the north and north-west by the Wadi al-Salam cemetery, to the east by the outskirts of Kufa, and to the south and south-east by a stony desert dotted with a few oases, some of which are centred around small Shi'i shrines. Whereas it is fairly easy to understand the location of Kufa on the western bank of the Euphrates and the earlier city of Hira on its eastern bank, the choice of Najaf as a human settlement continues to baffle historians. Why would a fairly substantial town occupy a slight hill with infertile land, minimal rainfall and no direct access to a river or canal? Why would humans choose such a site, which is further characterized by extremely hot summers, cold winters and dusty winds during the change of seasons? The only relief from heat, dust and aridity is the brackish Bahr al-Najaf, which stretches west of the city in a depression around 50 m below it. But that can hardly be the justification for siting a city.

One logical explanation for the creation of a town in this location is precisely the elevated hill it occupies, surrounded as it is by utterly flat plains and the lower valley of Bahr al-Najaf. Normally this would make a site suitable for a fortified observation post, or much more likely, a burial site. Indeed, hills adjacent to or near urban settlements have been used as burial sites or cemeteries since times immemorial, including Nineveh, Hatra and Aleppo, where the current citadel was once a burial site. It is possible, therefore, that the actual settlement of Najaf was predated by a burial mound, later called the Wadi al-Salam cemetery, and that Najaf as a town originally grew as a settlement to house and accommodate visitors to the cemetery. In other words, the burial of Imam 'Ali in or near Najaf was not simply a random act of piety but was at least partly based on the preexistence of an important cemetery.



*Bahr al-Najaf and the western edge of Najaf in the distance.
The marshes are surrounded by palm groves
and vegetable gardens.*



This is not a point that can be easily verified by Islamic sources or accepted by traditional scholars. But it does conform, at least in spirit, to an often repeated saying attributed to Imam ʻAli at the moment of his death, when he exhorted his sons to 'Bury me next to my brothers Ehud and Noah.'[2] ʻAli's wish to be buried next to the tombs of two venerable prophets of the Old Testament reflects Islam's view of itself as continuous with the monotheistic religions that preceded it as well as ʻAli's own desire to be associated with the example of these prophets.

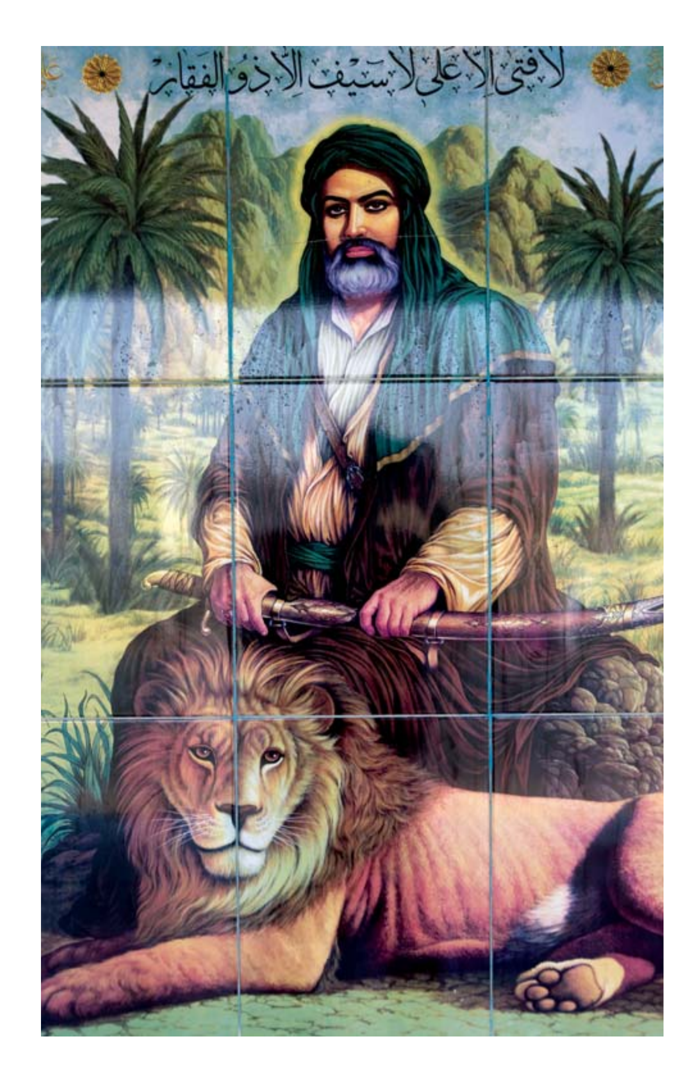
Najaf's mercantile importance has also been proposed as a reason for its location, since it is one of the easternmost cities of southern Iraq and on a route, later known as Darb Zubayda, that connected it to the holy cities of Medina and Mecca. But this is quite after the fact, since Najaf only became a city, let alone a mercantile city, after the building and rebuilding of the shrine of Imam ʻAli and after it had become an important destination for pilgrims. One indication of the necessary and intimate linkage between city and shrine is that when the shrine was destroyed, Najaf all but vanished. It only re-emerged after the rebuilding of the shrine. In other words, Najaf at its foundation was a burial city, and would soon thereafter become predominantly a shrine city, interrelated urban types with a long history in the Ancient Near East.



View of tombs from the second half of the twentieth century, Wadi al-Salam cemetery.

The history of Najaf, ancient to modern

We have already noted above the inherent difficulties in reconciling arguments based on verifiable archaeological and textual sources and those that rest on sacred histories and popular beliefs. One striking example to illustrate the divergences between these approaches is the actual location of the burial of Imam ʻAli. Many books and numerous chapters have been written on this subject, ranging in date from the tenth century CE to the present. The eleventh-century traveller Nasir-i Khusraw, for example, mentioned no less than thirteen sites that claim some sacred linkage with Imam ʻAli, and at least one other major shrine, Mazar-i Sharif in Balkh (Afghanistan), claims to be his burial site. Fartusi's recent book, entitled in translation *The Burial and Shrine of the Commander of the Faithful*, contains three entire chapters on this subject, listing hundreds of references to *hadith*, chronicles, hagiographies, biographies and travel literature, before concluding, somewhat predictably, that ʻAli's burial was more or less on the very spot where the shrine now stands.[3] Of course, this conclusion is not and cannot be based on any archaeological or documentary evidence – as is the case with many burials of saints and revered men of religion – nor is it supported by all textual sources. It is rather a conclusion based on the overwhelming consensus of Shiʻi scholars and popular opinion, and it is also a conclusion to which we will adhere in this book.

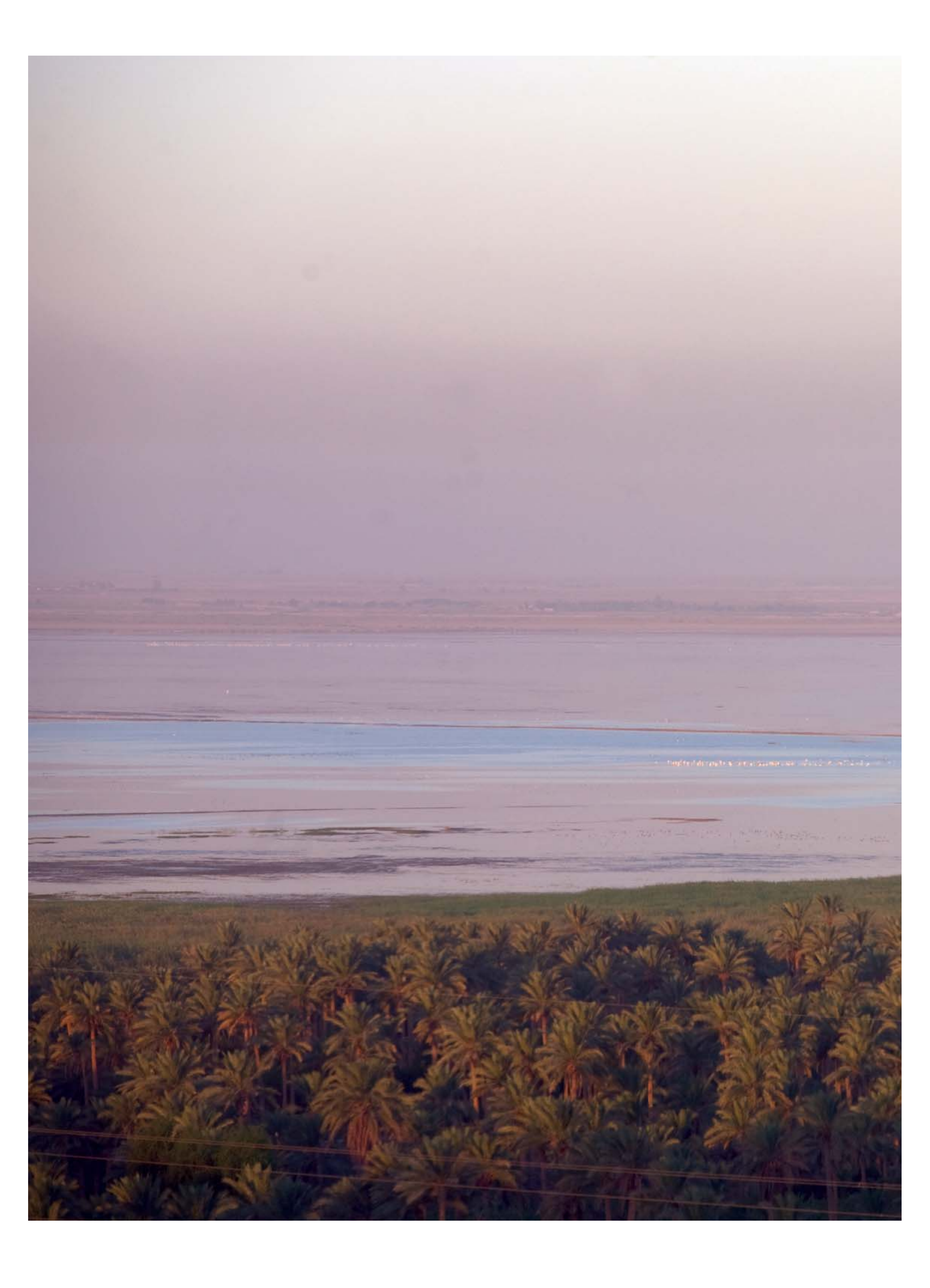


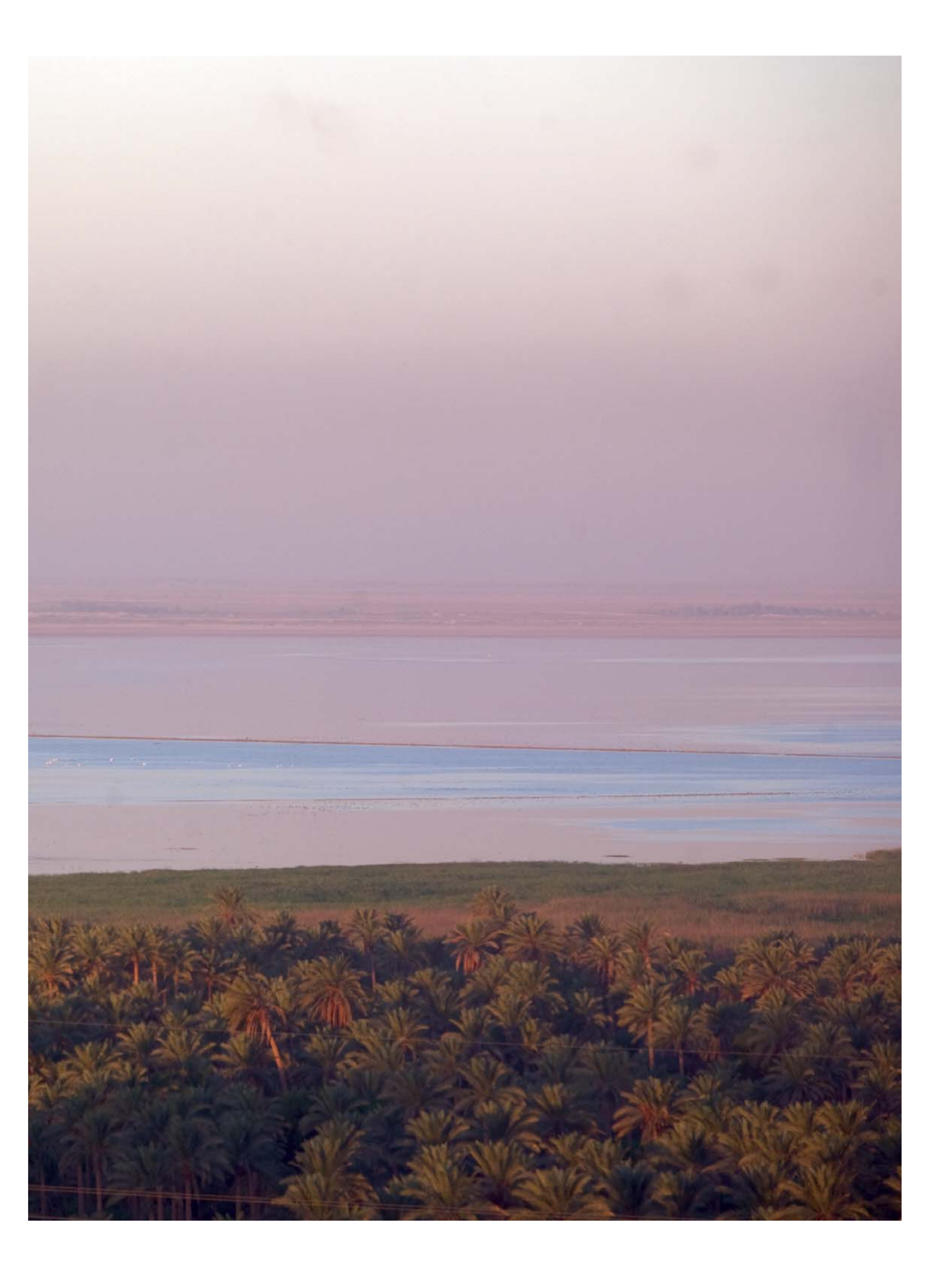
Glazed tile portrait of Imam 'Ali holding his sword (Zulfiqar) and the lion (Haydar), his attribute, at his feet. The portrait bears the famous inscription 'There is no man but 'Ali, and there is no sword but Zulfiqar'.

From Hira to Kufa to Najaf (fifth to eleventh centuries CE)

Since the fate of Najaf is intimately tied with Kufa and since their current urban extents overlap sufficiently to make them practically a single city, it seems necessary to begin this discussion of Najaf's early history with Kufa and with Kufa's precursor, Hira. Capital of the Arab Lakhmids, or al-Manathira, between the third and sixth centuries CE, Hira played a pivotal role in controlling and settling the tribes of eastern Arabia and in serving as centre for Nestorian Christianity and Arab literature. Although effectively a vassal dynasty of the Persian Sassanian, the Lakhmids conceived of themselves as the hereditary kings of the Arabs, a status that was at times recognized by the Sassanians. The Lakhmids played a significant role in providing a buffer state between the Sassanians and the Byzantines – quite like the Arab Ghassanids in western Arabia – and were at times instrumental in tipping the hand of the Sassanians: they helped them, for example, in their conquest of Bahrain and East Arabia. By the beginning of the seventh century, however, possibly in response to Byzantium's more expansionist policy under Emperor Justinian, the Sassanians abandoned their policy of vassalage and exerted greater control over the Lakhmids, which might have in turn alienated the Lakhmids and led them to side with the conquering Arabs later in the seventh century.

Despite this alliance, the Lakhmids adopted neither the Zoroastrian faith of their Sassanian overlords nor the Persian language. Rather, most of the Lakhmids and many of the inhabitants of Hira were Christian, whether Orthodox or Nestorian, and Hira was a diocese of Syriac Christianity between the fifth and eleventh centuries. Hira quickly became the gathering place for migrant tribes from Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula, and an important centre of Arab culture. It attracted the paragons of ancient Arab literature, such as Imru' al-Qays, Turfah Ibn al-'Abd and Zuhayr Ibn Abi Salma, making it one of the great centres of pre-Islamic Arab poetry. According to early Arab traditions, Hira is claimed to be the place where the Arabic alphabet and earliest writing first evolved, spreading from there across to western Arabia during the course of the sixth century before achieving a definitive status in Kufa some time in the late seventh century. Today the remains of Hira, located about 3 km south-east of Kufa across the Euphrates, contain a number of documented churches, monasteries, Christian burial sites, and the ruins of an important palace that some have identified as that of al-Munthir III.[4]





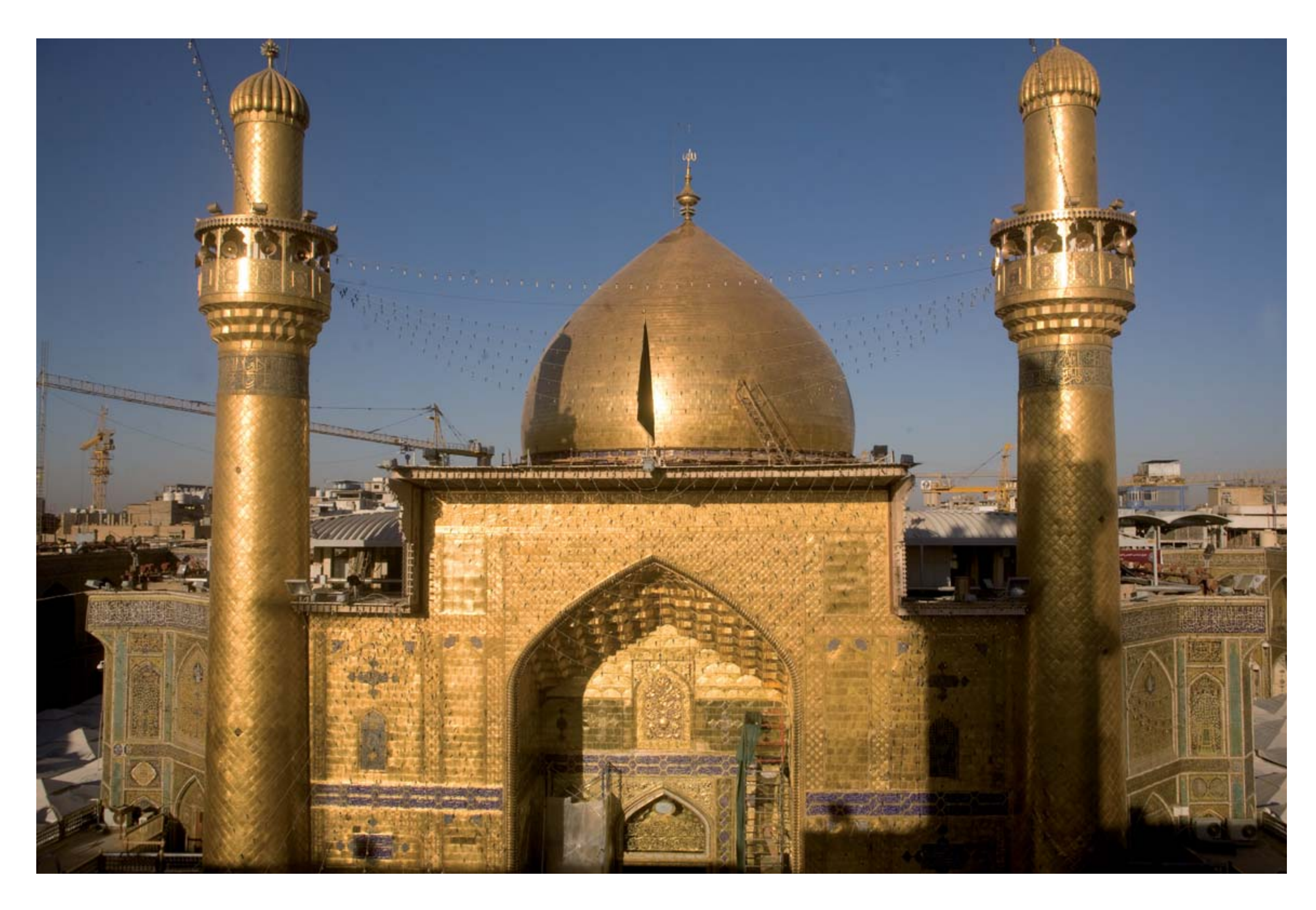
◤ *Palm groves at the edge of Bahr al-Najaf, with the desert in the distance.*

Hira fell to Arab Muslim armies in 633, and within three years Kufa was built across the Euphrates from it, as a *misr* – a garrison town – much like Basra and Wasit to the south. This early Islamic urban type was developed with three main concepts in mind: to prevent or impede the assimilation of the Arab Muslims into their new cultural context; to affirm their allegiance to the new faith and the new Islamic state; and to maintain and contain their tribal divisions. As such, Kufa and other *amsar* (garrison towns) were built a short distance from established cities or towns, with no body of water separating them from Medina, the first capital of the Islamic empire. Kufa was centred around a core of a congregational mosque (*jami'*) and a government house (*Dar al-Imara*), and its residential quarters were divided according to *khitta* or tribal allotments. In time markets filled in the spaces between the official core and the residential quarters, and the city was surrounded by a wall with defended gates.

Kufa quickly developed into an important city under the Rashidun, or first four, Caliphs, eclipsing Hira but perpetuating its cultural legacy as a centre of Arab literature and theological studies, and interestingly, as a refuge for Muslims who did not conform to the majority faith, who became known as the Shi'a. The destination of Arab tribes from the surrounding region and as far south as Bahrain, Kufa's size and significance are underlined by the fact that it was briefly made the capital of the Caliphate by the fourth caliph 'Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad and also the first imam of Shi'ism. 'Ali's reign was however deeply troubled, chiefly by opposition from another clan of the family of the Prophet Muhammad, the Umayyads, and by unfounded allegations that he was somehow involved in the murder of the third caliph 'Uthman, who belonged to the Umayyad clan. The differences between supporters of 'Ali and the supporters of the Umayyads also had a geographical dimension, for the former resided in the newly founded Islamic centres in Kufa and Basra, while the latter lived in the ancient city of Damascus.

The animosity between 'Ali and the leader of the Umayyads, Mu'awiya, precipitated the major Battle of Siffin in the upper Euphrates, which led to a significant split among Muslims into three opposing camps: those supporting the caliphate of 'Ali and his offspring; those supporting the Umayyads and their secular leadership; and a third group, the Kharijites, who abandoned 'Ali because of his acceptance of arbitration (*tahkim*) with the forces of Mu'awiya. These violent events between 'Ali and his Kufan supporters and Mu'awiya and his Umayyad supporters would be referred to in Islamic history as the First *Fitna* (sedition), a split that would soon have definitive consequences for the Islamic world. The supporters of 'Ali were known then as *shi'at 'Ali*, literally the party of 'Ali, from which the appellation Shi'a (or the Shi'ites), Shi'i (the adjective) and Shi'ism emerged.

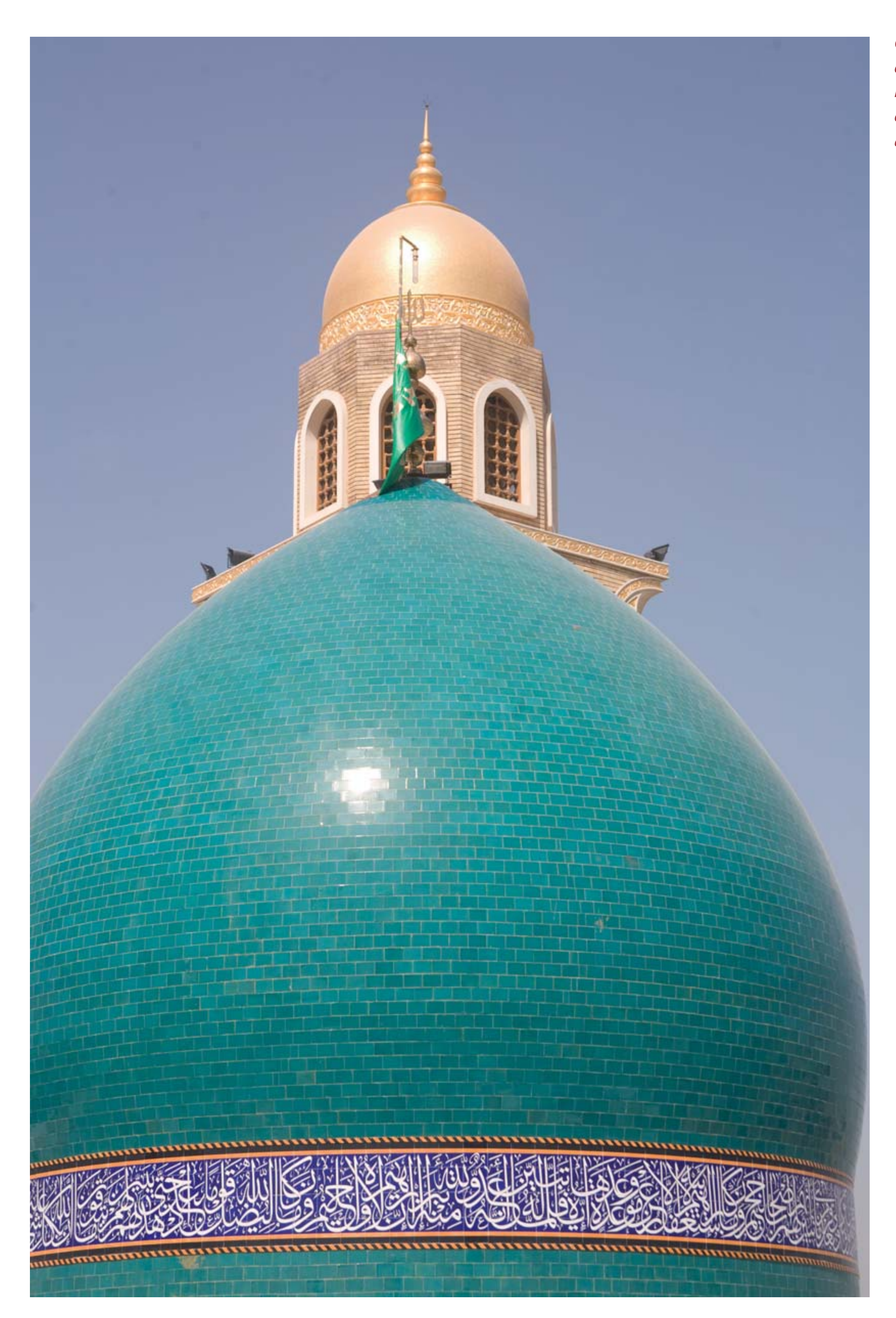
With the eventual murder or martyrdom of 'Ali, who was stabbed in 661 at the very *mihrab* (prayer niche) of the Great Mosque of Kufa, the rule of the Islamic world passed uneasily to Mu'awiya of the Umayyads instead of al-Hasan and al-Husayn, the sons of 'Ali from his marriage with Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet. The reason for this change in succession is that al-Hasan, wishing not to shed more Muslim blood and to maintain the unity of the nascent Muslim state, accepted the principles of the so-called 'Peace Treaty of al-Hasan,' whereby he would temporarily remove himself from succession in favour of Mu'awiya, with the condition that his younger brother al-Husayn would succeed Mu'awiya. Mu'awiya promptly moved the capital of the Caliphate from Medina to Damascus, drawing on the support of his Syrian contingents, while attempting to appease the *shi'at 'Ali* (henceforth Shi'a) and keeping a watchful eye on Kufa and Iraq. When, near his death, Mu'awiya declared his reign hereditary within his own



Eastern view of the shrine of Imam 'Ali, with its dome, its twin minarets and the Golden Iwan.

lineage and appointed his son Yazid as his successor, the Shi'a, now led by al-Husayn, rejected and opposed this succession. Matters quickly worsened, aggravated primarily by Yazid's violent temperament, his eroding support among the Muslim population, and his fear of the charismatic leadership of Imam al-Husayn.

Yazid therefore declared war against al-Husayn and his Shi'i supporters, who were largely located in Kufa and southern Iraq. He dispatched a large army to Iraq at a point between Kufa and Karbala, hoping in this way to cut off al-Husayn's forces, which had earlier departed from Mecca, from support and supplies from Kufa, and to keep them away from the waters of the Euphrates. Cut off from (some might say betrayed by) their Kufan supporters, and literally dying of thirst, al-Husayn's forces fought valiantly to the bitter end. Al-Husayn, his half brother al-'Abbas, and many other members and close allies of the Family of the Prophet



Great Mosque of Kufa with its green dome of Hani Ibn 'Arwa and minaret.

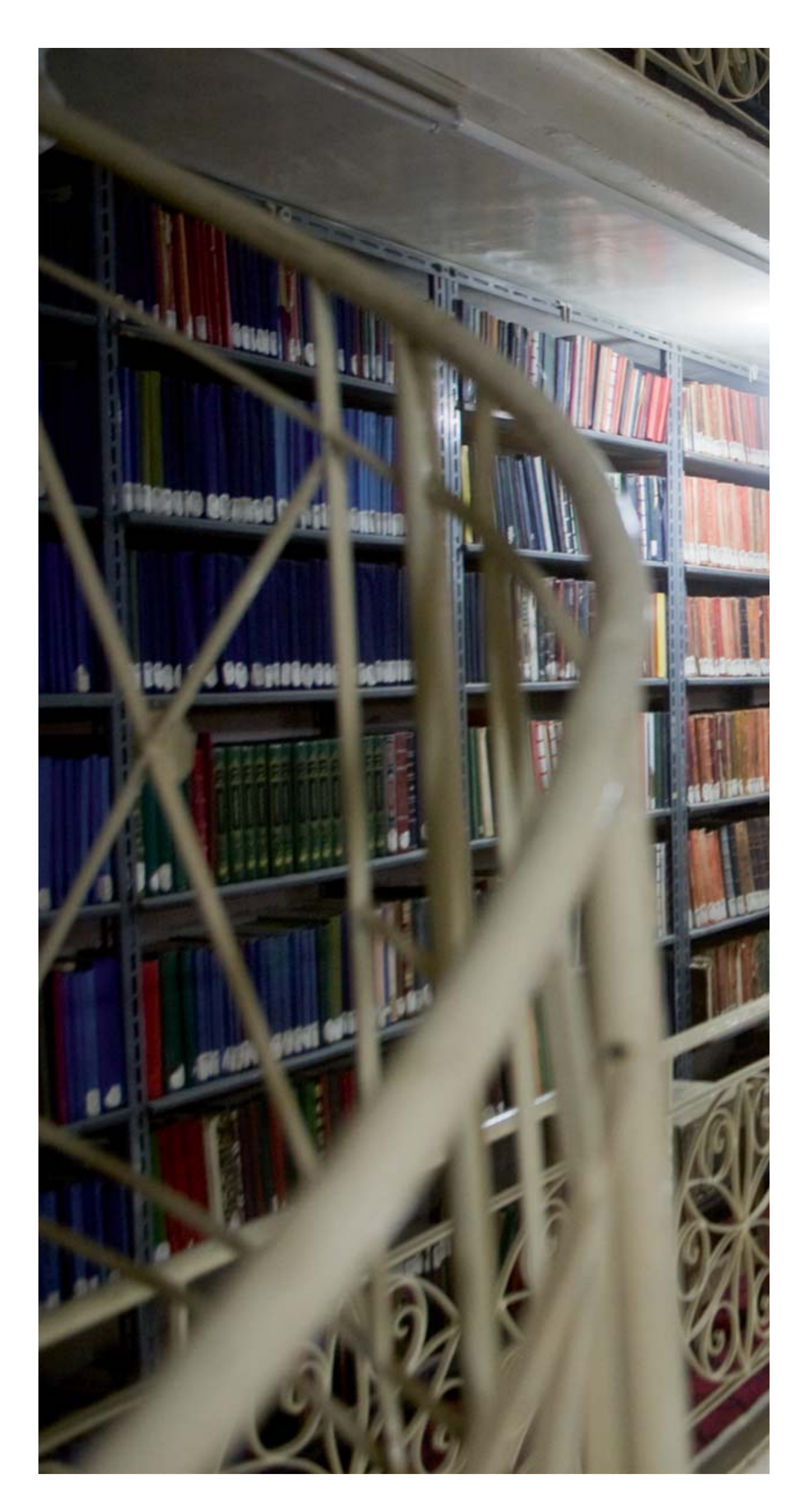


Iranian pilgrims from Isfahan pray in the courtyard of the shrine of Imam 'Ali.

(*Ahl al-Bayt*) perished in this battle, while the women, including al-Husayn's brave sister Zaynab, were taken prisoners to the court of Yazid in Damascus. Only the young 'Ali al-Sajjad, or Zayn al-'Abidin, survived, and he would eventually continue the legacy of his father and grandfather.

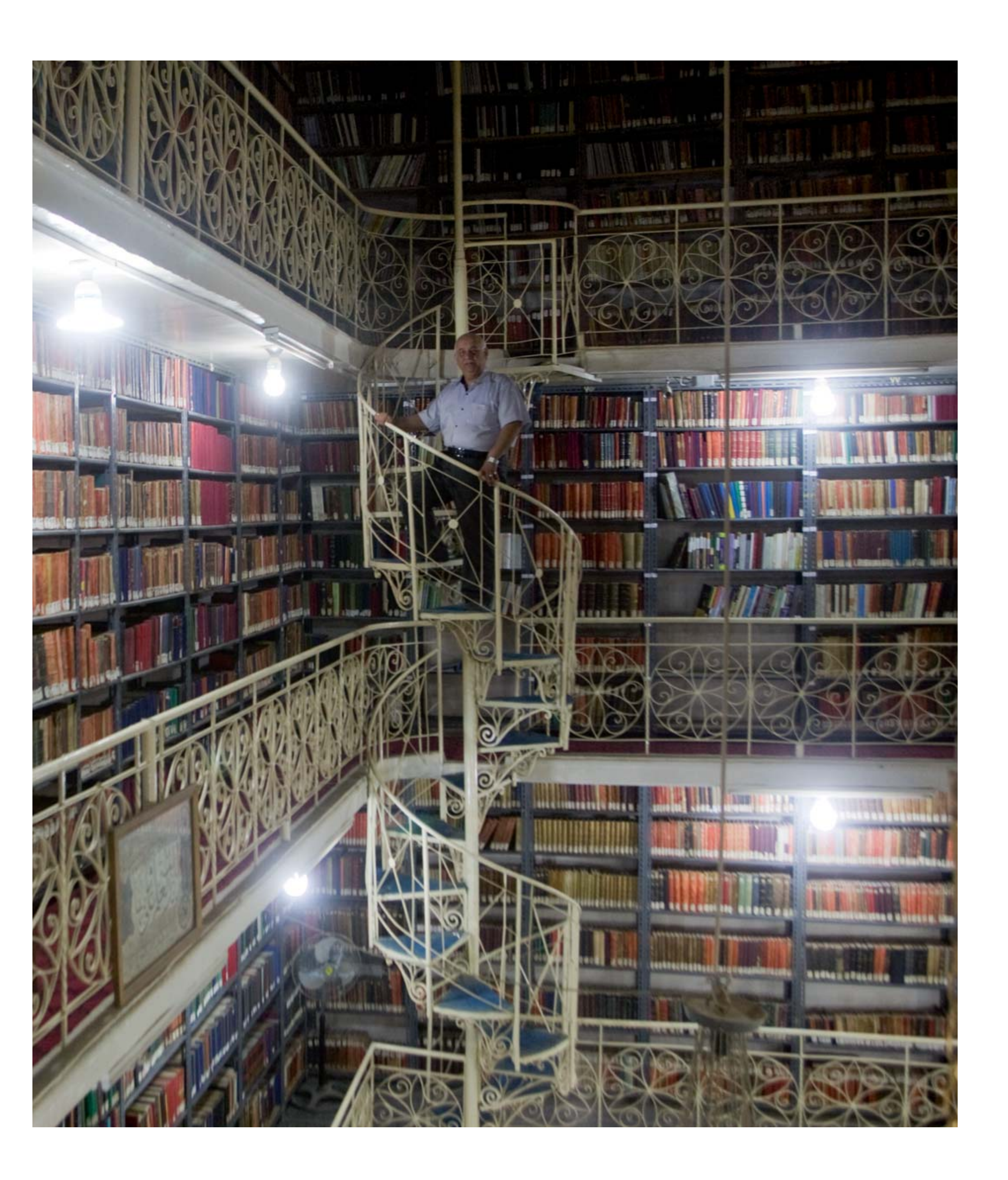
This was the Second *Fitna*, better known as the battle of Karbala, and it marked the definitive rupture among Muslims, between those who accepted the de facto and consensus-based Caliphate, henceforth Ahl al-Sunna, or Sunnis; and those who rejected this and insisted that the succession should remain within the lineage of 'Ali and Fatima, known as the Shi'a. In time, the military and even political claims of the Shi'a would subside – a natural reaction to the overwhelming power of the Umayyads – and Shi'ism would instead develop into an alternative religious sect within Islam, with a somewhat different theological and juridical structure and with substantially different rituals.

The Amir al-Mu'minin Library and its director 'Ali Jihad al-Hasani.



But despite the persisting animosity between the Umayyads and the Kufans, Kufa continued to prosper and increase in size, evidenced among other things by the expansion and rebuilding of its congregational mosque in 670 during the governorship of Ziyad Ibn Abih. The violent end of Umayyad rule in 750, and the assumption of the Abbasid to the Caliphate, shifted the balance of the Islamic world once again eastward to Iraq and beyond, but this time the shift was quite definitive. Briefly making their capital in Kufa, the Abbasids in 762 then moved their seat to Baghdad, which would remain the capital of the Caliphate till 1258 and of Iraq to the present day.

We have so far said a great deal about Kufa and rather little about Najaf, a direct reflection of their relative importance in early Islamic history. In fact Najaf only enters Islamic history once it had been acclaimed as the burial place and eventual shrine of Imam 'Ali, eventually to be known as *al-Najaf al-Ashraf* (Most Noble Najaf) and revered as one of the holiest places for Shi'ism, after Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. But this is much in the future, and the details of the building and rebuilding of the shrine of Imam 'Ali, although it is in fact so intimately linked with the destiny of Najaf, are discussed mainly in Chapter 3. Suffice it to say here that the once secretly located, or possibly ignored, tomb of Imam 'Ali became a public shrine in 786 during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid, a century and a half after Imam 'Ali's martyrdom. It seems likely that both the shrine and the pre-existing cemetery with the tombs of various prophets and patriarchs contributed to turning Najaf gradually into a sister city to Kufa, in much the same way that Kufa had been a sister city to Hira.



In time, the shrine of Imam 'Ali became a sanctuary, visited by Muslims from near and far, and undoubtedly some of them chose to settle in close proximity to the blissful shrine. These visitors became permanent settlers, known in Arabic as *mujawirun*, and they formed a core population of Najaf. Other families claiming sacred descent from Imam 'Ali or his progeny, known as the *sayyids*, also settled in Najaf. Furthermore, since Shi'ism places such a high value on the pursuit and transmission of knowledge and on its own brand of *ijtihad* (interpretation of legal or theological questions), Najaf gradually developed as a centre of religious learning that would attract generations of theologians, jurists and transmitters of prophetic traditions. These men and their families and clans formed another core population of Najaf, and these populations – the first settlers, the *sayyids* and the scholars – would have originated the demand for various goods and services that led to the creation of markets and other utilitarian structures.

During its first three centuries of existence, Najaf's fate closely followed that of the Islamic Caliphate, first in Damascus and then Baghdad, and the vicissitudes of the governors appointed by various caliphs in order to deal with an important but restive part of the empire. It seems likely that Najaf's early history closely followed that of its sister city, Kufa, about which much more is known. The Umayyad period (661–750) was especially difficult for Kufa and its Shi'i population, who suffered greatly under a series of harsh and oppressive governors – Ziyad Ibn Abih, al-Hajjaj and others – and we can assume that Najaf also suffered from this oppression. Indeed, the fact that the burial of Imam 'Ali was ignored for 150 years and a shrine was only built in 786 should underline the attempted marginalization of this important centre of Shi'i piety.

The ninth and tenth centuries, which were characterized by the rise of various Shi'i dynasties and overlords in much of the Islamic world, not surprisingly signalled the increased importance of Najaf as both shrine and city. Under the Shi'i Hamdanid ruler of Mosul, Abu'l-Hayja' in the late ninth century, the tomb of 'Ali was first marked with a dome, and in 369/979–80[5] this early shrine was expanded by 'Adud al-Dawla, the Buyid ruler whose Shi'i dynasty had effectively taken over the Abbasid Caliphate from 333/945 to 447/1055. A prodigious builder and outstanding statesman, 'Adud al-Dawla had the city walled and protected by a citadel, and also ordered an underground aqueduct – a Persian-style *qanat* – to be built between the Euphrates and Najaf, passing several metres below the city and finally emptying into the lower Bahr al-Najaf. This ingenious project, whose traces are still visible in aerial photographs, clearly points to the increased importance of Najaf and the demands of its larger population.

Indeed, the Buyid period represents precisely the epoch when the tombs of many Shi'i imams in Iraq – Imam al-'Askari in Samarra, Imam al-Kazim just north of Baghdad, Imam al-Husayn and al-'Abbas in Karbala, and Imam 'Ali in Najaf – were rebuilt as shrines, and also when the Shi'i inhabitants of various Iraqi cities were permitted, even encouraged, to visit shrines and hold public festivals and ceremonies on feast days. Since then, these shrine cities have formed the heart of Shi'ism and a destination for Shi'a worldwide. In contrast Iran contains the tomb and shrine of just one imam: the eighth imam, 'Ali al-Rida (Ali Reza), in Mashhad.

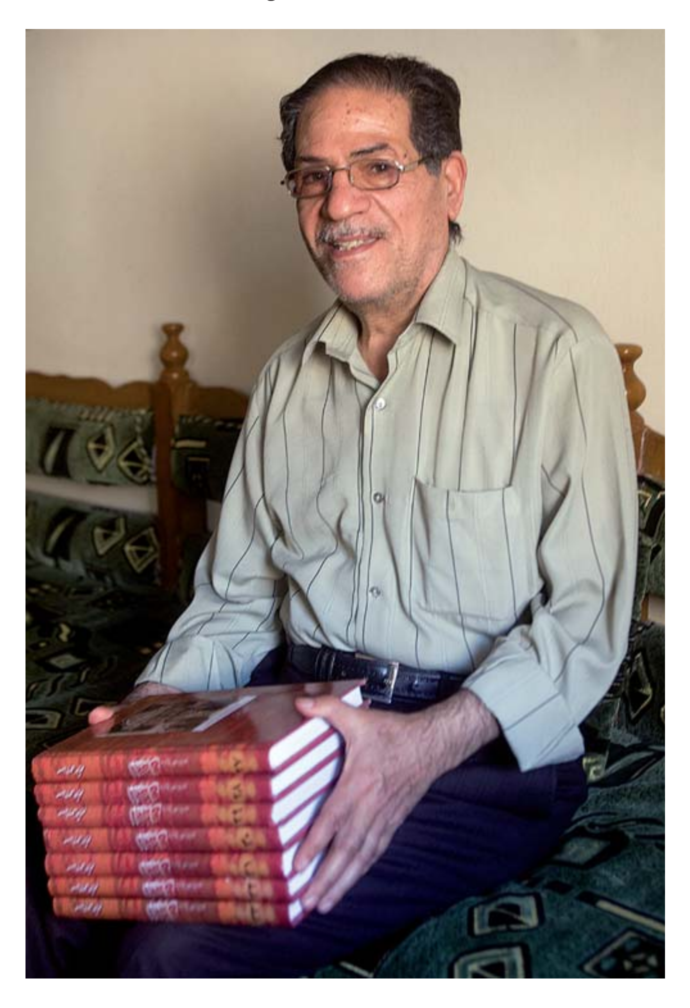
Hasan al-Hakim and the memory of Najaf

There is no doubt that Dr Hasan al-Hakim loves history, since he has devoted his life to it. He also loves his home town of Najaf, and while he has written works on Baghdad, Hira and Hilla he has dedicated an immense encyclopaedia of over fifty volumes, al-mufassal fi tarikh al-Najaf (Details of the History of Najaf), *to Najaf. Its publication is now nearing completion. 'The idea came to me when I was writing my Master's thesis on Shaykh al-Tusi,' Dr al-Hakim remembers. 'He was the man who really opened up perspectives on the history of Najaf for me.'*

Following a doctorate in history at the University of Baghdad which he defended in 1982, Dr al-Hakim pursued a brilliant career as a professor of history, which culminated in his appointment as president of the University of Kufa. He has written some fifty books on various subjects, along with an impressive number of journal articles. His works cover the walls of the room in his house where he receives visitors, and among them are the volumes of his encyclopaedia on the history of Najaf. This work has placed him in the ranks of other famous authors who have written on the history of the city, among them Ja'far al-Mahbuba (d. 1958 CE) and Ja'far al-Dujaili, as well as various contemporary historians.

'The encyclopaedia is an old project,' Dr al-Hakim says. 'But I was worried about the repression by Saddam's government, and so in 1991 I decided to put the manuscript on hold.' Later he took up the work again, tracing the history of the city in chronological fashion from the pre-Islamic period onwards with all the patience and meticulousness of a historian used to tracking down documents and other source materials. Hasan al-Hakim's personal library bears witness to this work. It is a veritable mine of information in which books, sometimes arranged next to each other and sometimes stacked up in piles, rub shoulders with documents that have been carefully preserved in home-made fashion by being stuck on pieces of cardboard and protected with plastic film.

Hasan al-Hakim's love of history goes along with his love of literature, and he also runs a cultural society which brings together writers, poets and lovers of literature on a regular basis to spend an evening discussing an author or topic of literary interest. The subjects vary from meeting to meeting, ranging from literary history to contemporary issues, and from a classical poet such as the second/eighth-century writer al-Sayyid al-Himyari to recent developments on the Internet. The tradition of literary societies has long been part of the cultural life of Najaf, much like the poetry competitions that still attract the learned men of the city. Far from being consigned to the history books, this tradition has been continued by members of the leading Najaf families, such as Dr al-Hakim, and it remains very much alive today.



Hasan al-Hakim at home with copies of his encyclopaedia.



Craftsmen and boys gather around lunch at Najaf's Grand Bazaar.

From the Saljuqs to the Mongols (fifth/eleventh to ninth/fifteenth centuries)

The relative tolerance of Shi'ism continued even during the otherwise stridently Sunni reign of the Great Saljuqs (447/1055–c.555/1160), and the third Saljuq Sultan Malikshah bestowed substantial gifts on the shrines of both Najaf and Karbala in 479/1086, while at the same time founding several Sunni *madrasas* (law colleges) in Baghdad, Mosul and elsewhere. Unfortunately, the ostensibly ecumenical policy of the Great Saljuqs was largely rejected by the Abbasid caliphs and their staunchly Sunni supporters. This led to considerable sectarian tension in Baghdad around the middle of the fifth/eleventh century, as the Sunni part of the city, Rusafa, turned against its Shi'i quarter, Karkh. One important consequence of this sectarian tension was an assassination attempt in Baghdad on the grand Shi'i theologian Shaykh al-Tusi (388/998–459/1067),

Model exposed at the library of Imam 'Ali's shrine presenting an ongoing project for the shrine's expansion.

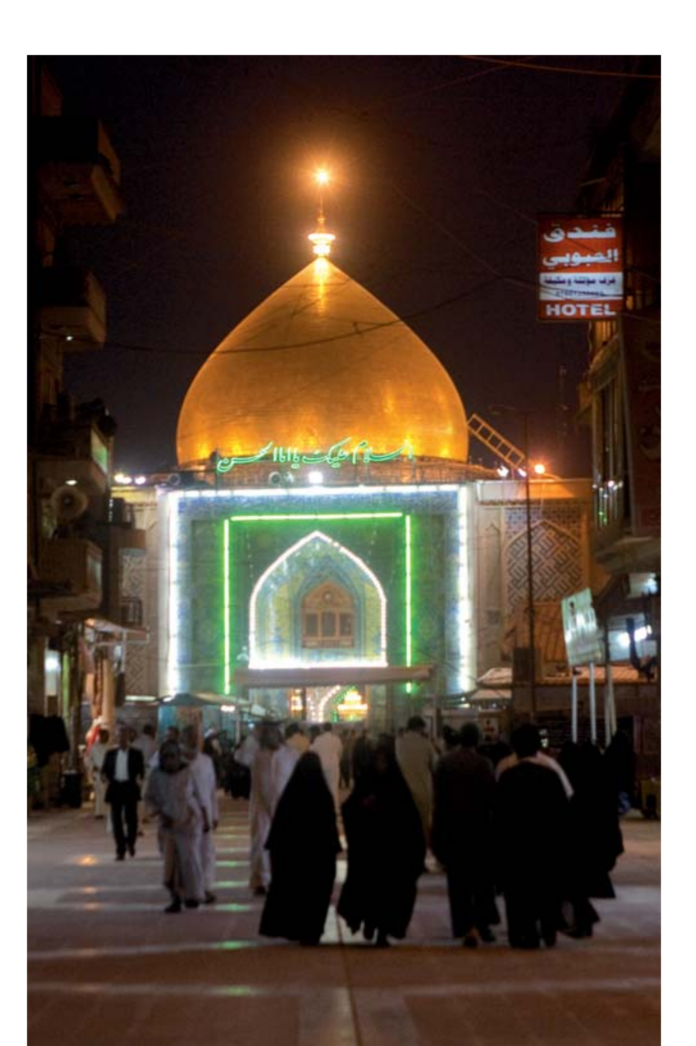


which led him to abandon the capital for Najaf, along with some of his students. Najaf became his permanent residence until his death. Al-Tusi is reputed to have created the first *hawza* (theological seminary) in Najaf, which expanded the city's reputation as a centre of Shi'i scholarship and made it a focal point of religious scholars and pilgrims.

The late twelfth and first half of the thirteenth century CE – the twilight of the Abbasid Caliphate – was an especially good epoch for Najaf and Iraqi Shi'ism generally, initiated as it was by the ecumenical and pro-Shi'i policies and patronage of the charismatic Caliph al-Nasir (576/1180–622/1225). Both al-Nasir and his successors, al-Mustansir and al-Musta'sim, visited Najaf and gave alms to the poor and endowments for the restoration of the shrine. It was during al-Nasir's reign, in 580/1184, that the Andalusian traveller Ibn Jubayr visited Kufa and saw from a distance the shrine of Imam 'Ali, but he had to press on with his journey without actually visiting it.[6]

Although Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate, was sacked and burned in 656/1258 at the hands of the Mongol invaders, Najaf and Karbala were spared this fate. The dynasty founded by the Mongols in Iran and Iraq, known as the Ilkhanids (656/1258–*c.*751/1350), was quite supportive of Shi'ism, possibly because its first sultans had adopted the Shi'i faith before turning to Sunnism around the second decade of the fourteenth century CE. For example, the vizier 'Ala' al-Din Juwayni contributed in 665/1267 various buildings and installations to serve the needs of the pilgrims to the Najaf shrine, as did Sultan Ghazan Khan in 702/1303.

One of the most important and vivid descriptions of Najaf during the period of Mongol rule was given by the North African traveller Ibn Battuta, who made his visit in 725/1325. He described Najaf as 'a beautiful city lying on expansive and solid land, one of the best and most populous cities in Iraq and the most solidly built, with



A perspective of the Bab al-Tusi entrance to the shrine, by night.

Preparation of Arabic coffee in Najaf's Grand Bazaar during 'Ashura.

pleasant and clean markets', adding that, in addition to the Noble Sanctuary, the city had numerous mosques, *zawiyas* (small mosques belonging to religious orders), *khanqas* (Sufi convents) and seminaries. The students and teachers in these pious and educational institutions were spared from working to earn a living by allowances of food and stipends provided for them by various religious endowments (*waqfs*), and even 'guests are given three days' hospitality of bread, meat and dates, twice a day'.

Perhaps Ibn Battuta's most astute observations concerned the unique system of governance of Najaf, which though indirectly subject to the Mongol governor in Baghdad, was described by him as fiscally and administratively autonomous. These powers rather rested exclusively in the authority of the *naqib al-ashraf* (representative of the religious nobility), so that no one had authority over him. Ibn Batutta added that this supreme religious leader 'holds the rank of great princes … to him belongs the dominion of this city and there are no rulers in it save him, no collector of taxes for the Sultan or any other'.[7] The *naqib al-ashraf* of Najaf even assumed limited military responsibilities, defending and protecting pilgrims' caravans, a very uncommon exception to centralized military authority in this period. One final note regarding Ibn Battuta's visit is that he mentioned Kufa as a mosque and shrine but not as a city, which is likely a reflection of Kufa's depopulation and diminished status.

The disastrous events of 656/1258 were repeated a century and half later in the second Mongol invasion of 803/1400 under Timur, who also sacked Baghdad but spared the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala. Timur made a pilgrimage to both cities, where he stayed a total of twenty days, during which time he oversaw the restoration of their shrines and presented gifts and endowments to them.[8] The increased attention to Najaf seems to have come at the expense of Kufa, which by the end of the sixth/twelfth century seems to have lost much of its importance as a cultural and political centre, reverting to a small town with a venerable mosque and important shrines.

Safavids, Ottomans and Qajars (ninth/fifteenth to the early fourteenth/twentieth centuries)

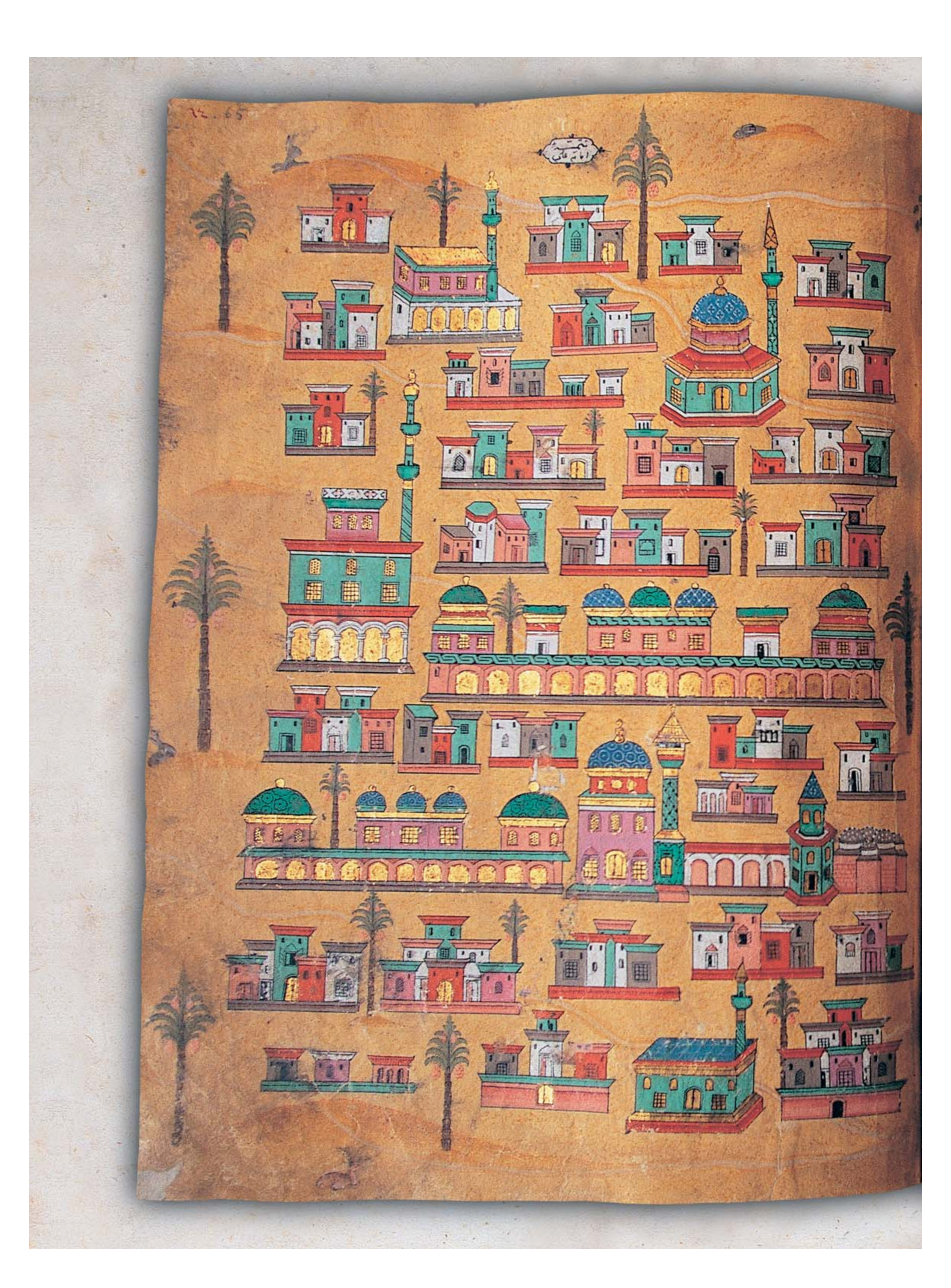
Najaf continued to be autonomous for many centuries during the rule of the Ilkhanids, the Timurids and during its contested rule in much of the ninth/fifteenth century by the Turkoman dynasties of the Qara Qoyunlu (Black Sheep) until 872/1468, and the Aq Qoyunlu (White Sheep) from 1468 until the Safavids took control in 1508. Even under the more centralized government of the early Ottomans, who conquered

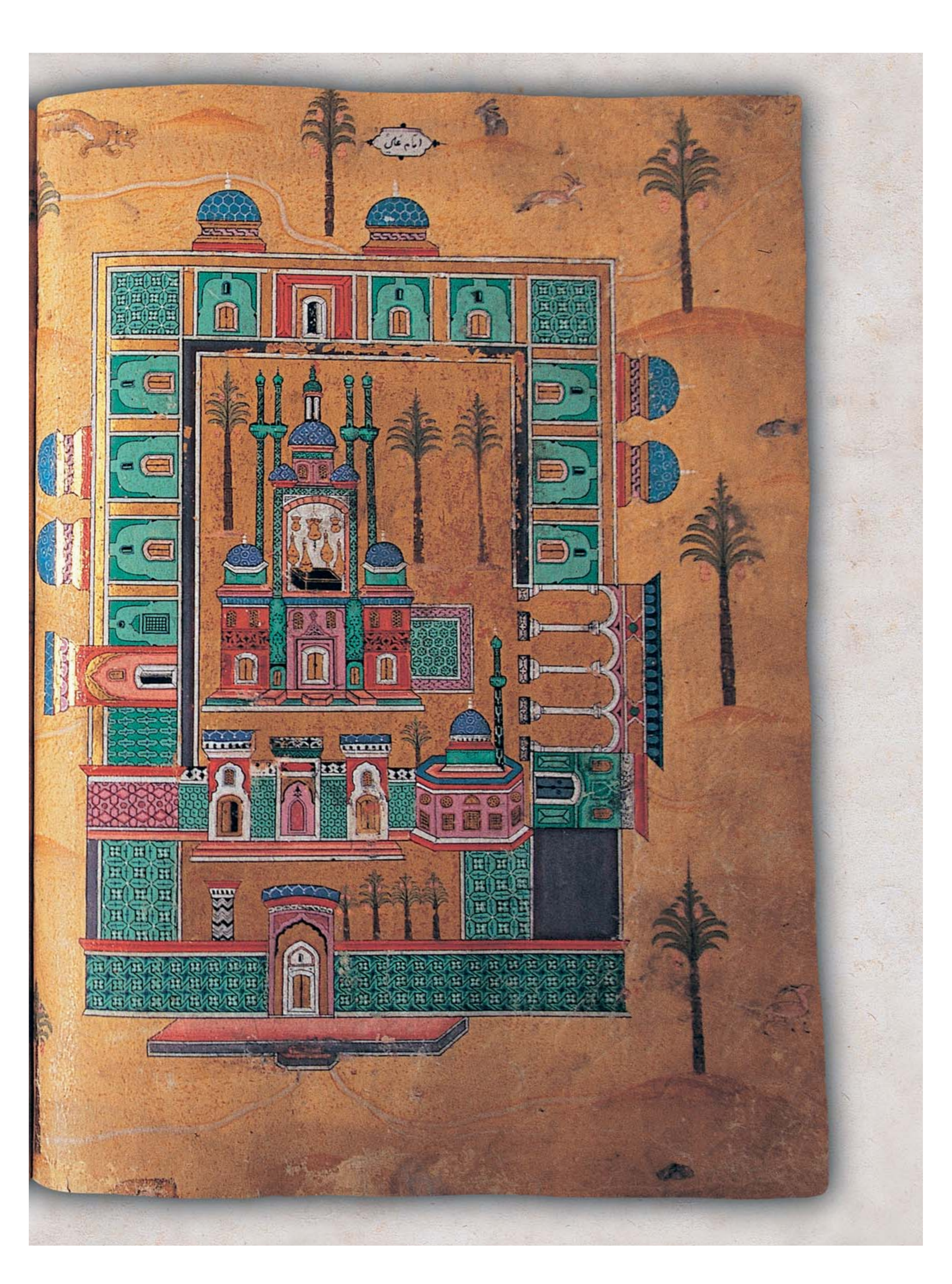


southern Iraq in 945/1538, Najaf continued to be an autonomous city governed by the *naqib al-ashraf*, whose rule was made hereditary by a decree of certification from Istanbul. The descendants of some of these *naqib* families – including Faqih and Kamuna – still reside in Najaf today.

Contested between the Sunni Ottoman dynasty and the rising Shi'i Safavid dynasty for much of the tenth/sixteenth century, Najaf surrendered to Safavid rule at the beginning of the century and was visited in 914/1508 by Shah Isma'il, the charismatic founder of the dynasty. Shortly afterwards however, in the aftermath of the Safavid defeat at the battle of Chaldiran in 920/1514, Ottoman forces took northern Iraq, and twenty years later they took southern Iraq as well, including Baghdad, Najaf and Karbala. In 940/1534 the great Ottoman sultan Suleyman the Magnificent, who led the army, visited Karbala and Najaf and bestowed considerable gifts on the shrines. The special regard with which Najaf was held by the Ottomans is further confirmed by a splendid double-page painting of Najaf in Matrakçı Nasuh's famous illuminated manuscript that describes Sultan Suleyman's campaign in Iraq.

Several other Safavid–Ottoman battles were fought throughout the tenth/sixteenth century. These culminated a century later in a continuous conflagration (1032/1623–1048/1639) during which the Safavids, under Shah 'Abbas I, took over Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf. They only managed to keep them for fifteen years, till 1047/1638, when the Ottomans once again regained southern Iraq. Hostilities ended in the Treaty of Zuhab in 1048/1639, after which the Ottomans, except for a three-year period in the twelfth/eighteenth century, kept control of all Iraq up to the First World War.




امام علی



Two men in the al-Buraq neighborhood.

Being the object of imperial ambition for both the Sunni Ottomans and the Shi'i Safavids generally benefited Shi'i shrine cities, including Najaf, whose sanctuary and *hawza* witnessed considerable expansion in the eleventh/seventeenth century.[9] The situation for the countryside in southern Iraq was less fortunate, for the war against the Safavids so depleted the Ottomans' treasury that they were forced to increase their tax revenues from the agricultural provinces. Increased taxation was accompanied by loss of autonomy, as the Ottomans replaced the position of the *naqib al-ashraf* by the less powerful position of *sadin*, or custodian, whose function was simply to oversee the affairs of the sanctuary of Imam 'Ali, leaving taxation and defence to the central government.

Persian control of Najaf and Karbala was established one last time under the Sultan Nader Shah (1156/1743–1159/1746), who was one of the greatest and most

◤ *Miniature of Najaf in 1534 by Matrakçı Nasuh, Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul, Turkey.*
© Alamy.

generous patrons of the shrine of Imam 'Ali, as we shall see below. But once again Iraq fell under Ottoman control, this time uninterruptedly till the First World War. Despite this Najaf and Karbala actually remained within the Persian cultural sphere, a situation that would continue throughout the thirteenth/nineteenth century under the Qajar dynasty (1199/1785–1343/1925). The Qajar shahs, in particular Fath 'Ali Shah (1211/1797–1250/1834) and Nasir al-Din Shah (1264/1848–1313/1896), were especially generous patrons of the Holy Shrines, and their legacy will be explored later.[10]

In 1216/1801 the conservative Sunni Wahhabis of Arabia attacked Najaf, plundered the city, and even attempted to tear down the shrine of Imam 'Ali, the first armed invasion of Najaf since its foundation. This unprecedented event prompted the religious nobility and tribal leaders of Najaf to take matters into their own hands and form local armed militias – the Zugurt and the Shomurt – to defend the city against future Wahhabi raids. Allied with patrician Najaf families, such as Al Kashif al-Ghita' and al-Milali, these militia groups provided urban stability and control and a corrective against occasional Ottoman tyranny. But their incessant infighting eventually led the Ottomans in 1269/1853 to curtail Najaf's autonomy by appointing a *sadin* of their own choosing, which was just a step toward complete control in the second half of the thirteenth/nineteenth century, when Najaf was subjected to the total administrative overhaul that accompanied the Ottoman Reforms (*tanzimat*). Thus, the traditional positions of *naqib* and *sadin* were disbanded and the city was instead included within the Ottoman *vilayat* administrative system, as the centre of a *qada'*, headed by a *qa'imaqam* (mayor) directly appointed by the Ottoman sultan. But even these restrictive measures were not sufficient to extinguish Najaf's desire for autonomy, for in 1333/1915 the Shomurt and Zugurt united to expel the Ottomans from Najaf and placed its four quarters under their direct control, a situation that continued till the end of the First World War.

From the First World War to the end of the fourteenth/twentieth century

A curious situation unfolded during the First World War with regard to the affiliation of the Iraqi Shi'a and their Sunni Ottoman rulers: should they stand by the Ottomans and support the Axis, or should they support instead the forces of the Arab Revolt that had sided with the Allies against the Ottoman Empire? Interestingly, despite past Ottoman persecution, the Iraqi Shi'a largely sided with Ottomans against the British, and even against the forces of the Arab Revolt headed by the sons of the Hashemite Sharif Husayn of Mecca. In this respect, the Shi'a of Iraq were acting first and foremost as Muslims, heeding the *fatwa* (religious decree) of their *ulamas* to stand by the Ottoman Islamic state against the British invaders. The Iraqi establishment, on the other hand, bided its time, divided as it was between siding with the last vestige of an Islamic Caliphate and supporting the rising hopes of independence as promised by the British. When in 1335/1917 the tide had already turned in the direction of the British, heralded regionally by the advances of the Arab Revolt led by Prince Faisal I, the Iraqi political establishment sided with the British, leaving their Shi'i brethren in something of a dilemma.

It followed then that in the aftermath of the war and with the establishment of the British Mandate, many prominent Iraqi families from Baghdad and Mosul generally colluded with the British and were rewarded with high governmental positions and a cabinet that represented their interests but not those of southern Iraq. But nationalist ambitions for Iraqi sovereignty were soon thwarted when it became clear that the British had chosen Faisal I for the Iraqi throne. He was not only a foreigner to Iraq but also powerless without British support. As for the Shi'a, their early support for the Ottomans and opposition to the Allies consolidated into an anti-British campaign against

the colonization of Iraq, such that in 1336/1918 the British governor of Najaf was assassinated. The British responded harshly, cutting off the city's water supply and forcibly expelling a number of religious scholars, who made their way in 1338/1920 to Iran and settled in the holy city of Qom, where they contributed to the rise of its theological seminary.

Matters quickly worsened, and the local insurrection grew into a nationwide rebellion, the 1920 revolution, which was largely led by the Shi'a of Najaf and southern Iraq. Although harshly suppressed by the British within five months, this revolution marked a watershed in inter-sectarian relations, as the British charged Shi'i theologians and tribal leaders with sedition and incitement, and contrived to keep them away from cabinet positions and other important posts in the emerging state of Iraq. Thus, in 1351/1932, when the kingdom of Iraq was declared a sovereign nation, its Shi'i population, who far outnumbered the Sunnis, had effectively been reduced to minority status.

Politically, the period surrounding the Second World War, roughly 1354/1935–1374/1955, witnessed the rise of Arab nationalism, an ideology of liberation and unification which resonated widely in Iraq but that was generally opposed by the Hashemite royal family and their brilliant Anglophile prime minister, Nuri al-Sa'id. Likewise, different strands of communism and socialism found their way into the minds of the Iraqi intelligentsia, particularly among some Najafi intellectuals, and all these ideologies were initially united in their opposition to the British and aspirations for independence. Once the British Mandate had been disbanded in the aftermath of the Second World War, the differences and contradictions among these groups began to show, accelerated by two quite divergent events: the creation of Israel in 1367/1948, and the toppling of the Egyptian monarchy in 1371/1952 by the 'Free Officers' led by Jamal 'Abd al-Naser, the hero of Arab nationalism.

In 1377/1958 a military coup, led by the Arab nationalist officer 'Abd al-Karim Qasim, toppled the royal regime in Iraq amidst horrible slaughter that took the lives of the king, other members of the royal family, and soon after, Nuri al-Sa'id. The ensuing decade saw several military coups and much bloodshed, during which the new Ba'ath party managed to infiltrate the armed forces and gradually edge out the nationalists and liquidate the communists. Originally created by Syrian politicians and thinkers, Ba'athism claimed to address the aspirations of Arab nationalism – liberation and unification – and the plight of the common man, hence socialism. By the 1970s, Ba'athist rule had become firmly established in Iraq and increasingly centralized in a Sunni clan from the upper Euphrates city of Tikrit. From 1398/1978 to 1424/2003 Iraq was autocratically ruled by Saddam Husayn, who led Iraq into two disastrous wars, against Iran and Kuwait, and visited unspeakable violence and brutality upon his own population, especially the Kurds and the Shi'a.

Thus, the policies of Shi'i marginalization and exclusion that had already been in place during the British Mandate continued to the beginning of the sixteenth/twenty-first century, leading to Najaf's gradual intellectual and political decline, and loss of autonomy and influence. That Najaf – its shrine, *hawza*, *marja'iyya*, pilgrimage and population – have somehow managed to survive the exclusion, oppression and persecution of successive governments can only be attributed to the city's deep roots in Islamic history, the continuity of its Shi'i religious culture, and the powerful and protective presence of Imam 'Ali. The situation at the start of the sixteenth/twenty-first century, which was marked for Iraq by the fall of the Saddam regime in 2003, seems one about which we can be cautiously optimistic. At the very least we can say that the Najafis are finally masters of their own destiny.

Bint al-Huda, female scholar and activist

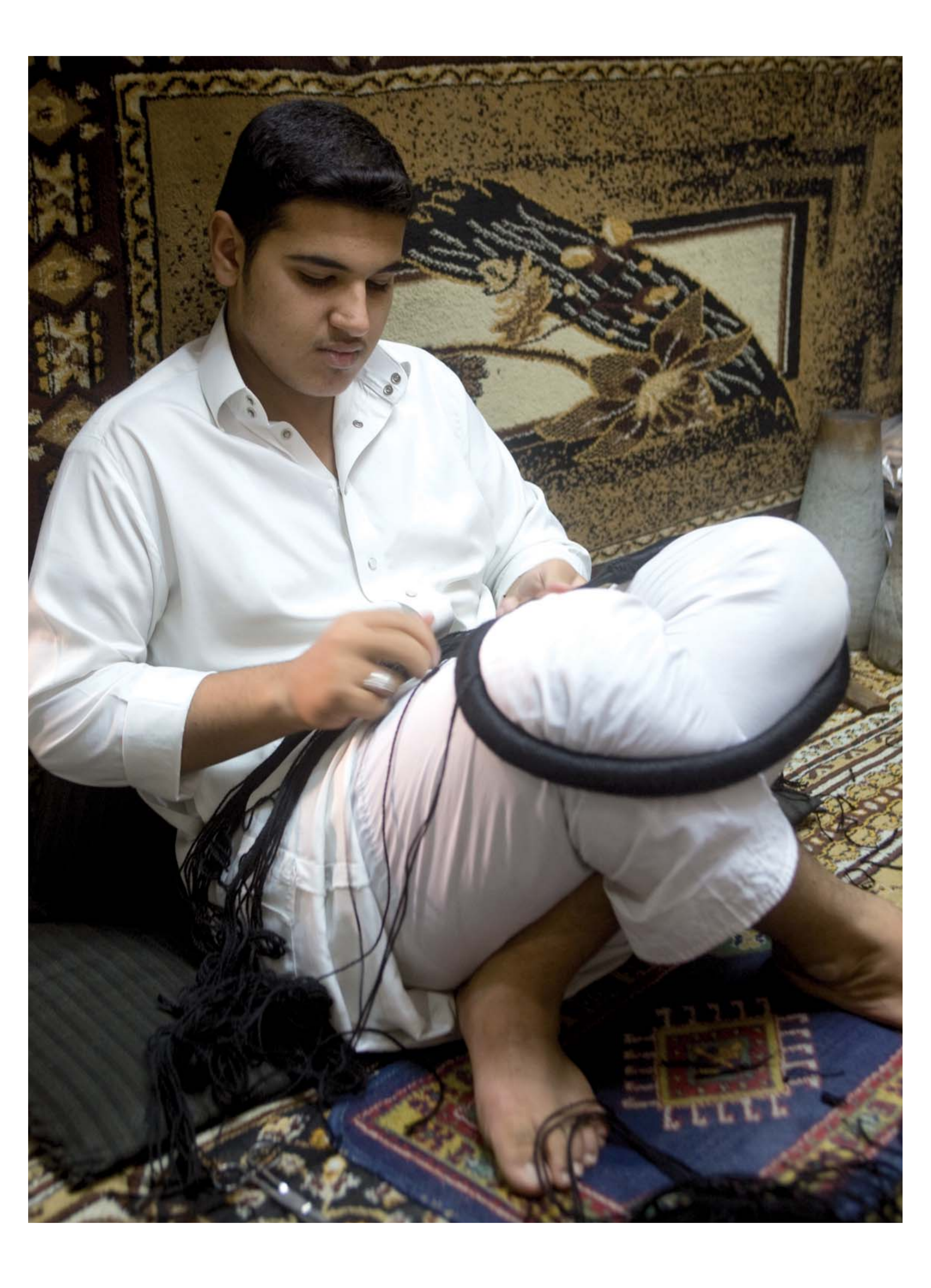
Amina al-Sadr (1937–1980 CE) was born in Kazimayn (Baghdad) into an eminent family of ulamas *whose ancestor, Sadr al-Din, originated from Jabal 'Amil (in what is today South Lebanon). Her father died the year she was born, and the family moved to Najaf, where her two brothers, Isma'il and Muhammad Baqir, took up the study of religious sciences. Amina followed their example, without leaving the house but supported by Muhammad Baqir. Before turning 20 she had penned her first treatise,* al-Huda (The Right Path), *after which she gained the name Daughter of the Right Path* (Bint al–Huda). *She went on pilgrimage to Mecca and wrote a diary relating her experiences.*

So as to dedicate herself to religious knowledge and women's rights, she remained celibate, living with her mother. By doing so she created a precedent in a society were women were not expected to live on their own without male relatives. When she was 22 her first article appeared in al-Adwa al-islamiyya (Islamic Lights), *a journal published by the Society of the Ulamas* (Jama'at al-ulama). *In subsequent articles she called on her Muslim sisters to go out of their houses, study, educate their daughters, follow the path of Islam and be wary of the Western model.*

Amina al-Sadr also created and ran primary schools for girls in Kazimayn and Najaf, and delivered courses to adult women and conferences to female university students and academics. Her main channel of influence on women was however her writing of poetry and fiction, both short stories and novels. In 1979, at the height of the political repression against the Islamic movement and the Shi'i ulamas, *Bint al-Huda and her brother Muhammad Baqir were put under house arrest. Both of them were seized on 5 April 1980 and executed shortly afterwards.*



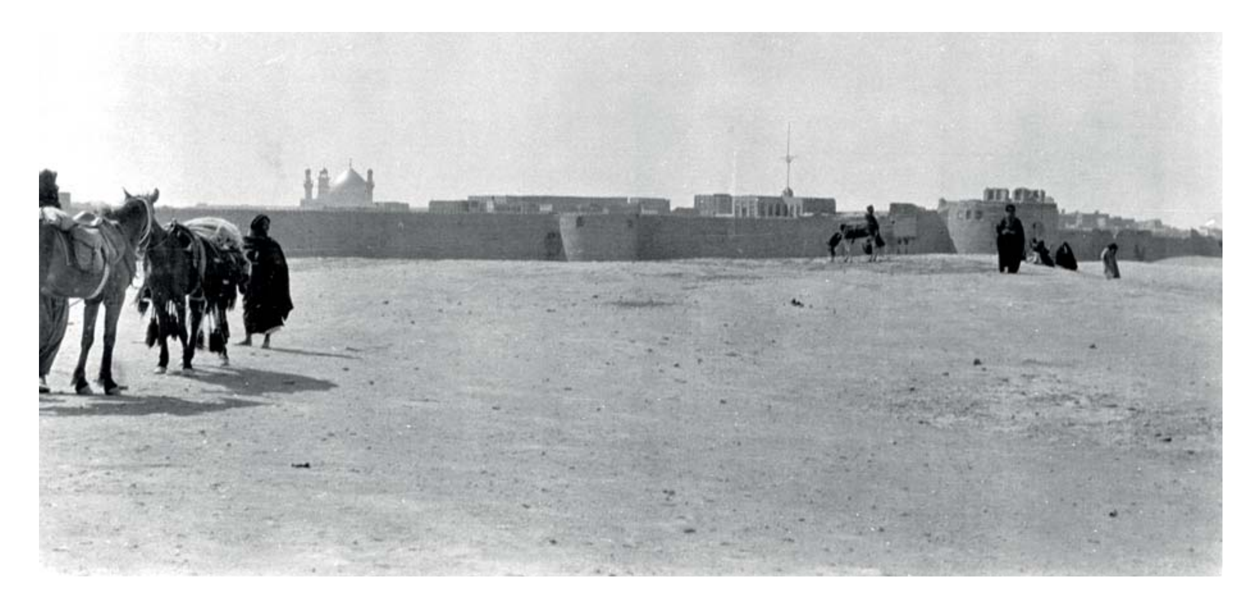
Following in the footsteps of Bint al-Huda, women attend a course on Islam in the husayniyya al-fatimiyya al-kubra *complex in Najaf.*





Najaf as a city

Its urban plan, urban form & demography



The city walls, 1911. Gertrude Bell Archive.

In this chapter we examine Najaf as an urban unit, discussing its overall plan, defensive wall, population, primary thoroughfares and markets, main quarters, its urban form and traditional house type. We focus primarily on the intramural city but also briefly discuss the prominent extramural urban developments, most of which have taken place since the second half of the fifteenth/twentieth century. Although a great deal of social, demographic and cadastral information is available for Najaf, nearly all of it is in Arabic, and most of this tends to be in the form of raw data or anecdotal evidence, limiting its usefulness in providing reference points for the lay reader.

In discussing the urban features of Najaf, we must clearly distinguish the traditional walled city, centred around the shrine, from the sprawling modern city that has spread outside its walls and linked it with Kufa. There is simply no way to examine the two 'cities' under one heading, or to posit their relationship in terms of continuity, for they differ in plan, urban form, built form, street patterns and social organization. This is indeed the case in many Islamic cities, but in Najaf the rupture between the traditional and the modern was effected with very little transition, for all intents and purposes in the second half of the fifteenth/twentieth century. For this reason, this chapter focuses primarily on the old walled city of Najaf – its urban plan and form, and its known demographic features – and quite briefly with the extramural city, which is substantially larger than the old city.

Even dealing with the walled city of Najaf in terms of the normative features of medieval Islamic cities is quite difficult since so many of these features have vanished, including its wall and citadel, as well as some markets and entire neighbourhoods, and many more have suffered from natural decay and abandonment. It proved necessary to consult descriptions, plans, maps and photographs of the city before its recent transformation.

An aerial photograph of Najaf taken by Gertrude Bell dating to 1336/1918 shows the city very much as it would have appeared to a traveller of the twelfth/eighteenth or thirteenth/nineteenth century. Taken from the south-east, the photograph shows a truncated circular city completely surrounded by a substantial brick wall. Only the square enclosure and golden dome of the shrine, and the east–west spine of the Grand Bazaar, stand out among the overall low-rise and high-density residential quarters of the city. Even the Wadi al-Salam cemetery, which today boasts some quite impressive mausoleums, appears windswept and half covered by desert sands. The only signs of 'modern' transformation are at the south-eastern edge of the wall, where rectangular barrack-like structures, quite likely dating from the late Ottoman period, had sprung up both within and outside the wall.

Najaf in the first half of the fourteenth/twentieth century, therefore, would have appeared as a drab and dusty town, slightly elevated above the surrounding plains, and encircled by a brick wall, which was itself surrounded by a moat. The city had an amorphous shape, roughly circular, with a circumference of around 3 km and a maximum length from east to west and from north to south of no

◤ *Maker of* 'agal *(roped rings above headdress) at Najaf's Grand Bazaar.*

Street between Najaf and Kufa ◥ *with an image of Imam al-Husayn and the words 'Holy Kufa, city of 'Ali'.*



Aerial view of Najaf, 1918. Gertrude Bell Archive.
© Newcastle University.

more than 900 m. According to photographs taken in the early fourteenth/twentieth century, Najaf's last defensive wall – which was said to be its sixth wall – consisted of a tall brick curtain wall, regularly reinforced with buttresses and towers and ornamented in its uppermost register with square panels that enclose recessed circles. The wall was pierced by five gates, four of which were located more or less at the cardinal directions: a northern gate leading to Karbala and Baghdad; an eastern gate to Kufa; a southern gate in the direction of Basra; and a western gate leading to Bahr al-Najaf and the Wadi al-Salam cemetery. A lesser fifth gate – midway between the west and south gates – seems indicated by the aerial photographs. Little has been documented of the surrounding wall, including its towers and gates, but its trace, or rather memory, is clearly visible today, as a vacant strip that has been taken up by a ring road which has been appropriately called *Shari' al-Sur*, Wall Street.



Lively Al-Tusi Street connects the shrine of Imam ʿAli and Wadi al-Salam.



Pastry shop in Najaf's Grand Bazaar.

Since Najaf is bordered to the north and north-west by the Wadi al-Salam cemetery and to the west and south-west by Bahr al-Najaf, its possibilities for expansion were restricted, and were mainly to the north-east, in the direction of Karbala, and to the east, in the general direction of Kufa. These topographical restrictions and the desirability of being linked with Kufa have given Najaf a decidedly easterly orientation, which is defined internally by a prominent east–west axis that cuts right through the middle of the shrine, passing through the Grand Bazaar, the public square east of it (*al-Maydan*), and continuing through the Kufa Gate, and on to the major thoroughfare connecting the two cities. By comparison, the north–south axis is much less prominent.

As would be expected in a city with such a prominent centre, all the main roads started at one of the gates and converged upon the shrine, a feature seen in

most Islamic cities and even in pre-Islamic Mesopotamian cities such as Babylon and Hatra. One or more of these thoroughfares functioned as souks while the others provided direct linkage between the centre, the gates, and the main travel or trade routes that linked the city with its surroundings and with other cities. Generally speaking, these thoroughfares needed to be only wide enough for two laden camels to pass one another, approximately 5 m. Indeed, it seems likely that these were originally the only thoroughfares in Najaf, the rest of the road network being composed of winding narrow streets, often no more than 3 m wide, that led to densely built residential quarters penetrated by even narrower alleys. Some of these narrow alleys were dead-ends and many more were further obstructed vertically by balconies and complete overhangs. Such a dense and unstructured street pattern is quite common in Islamic cities.

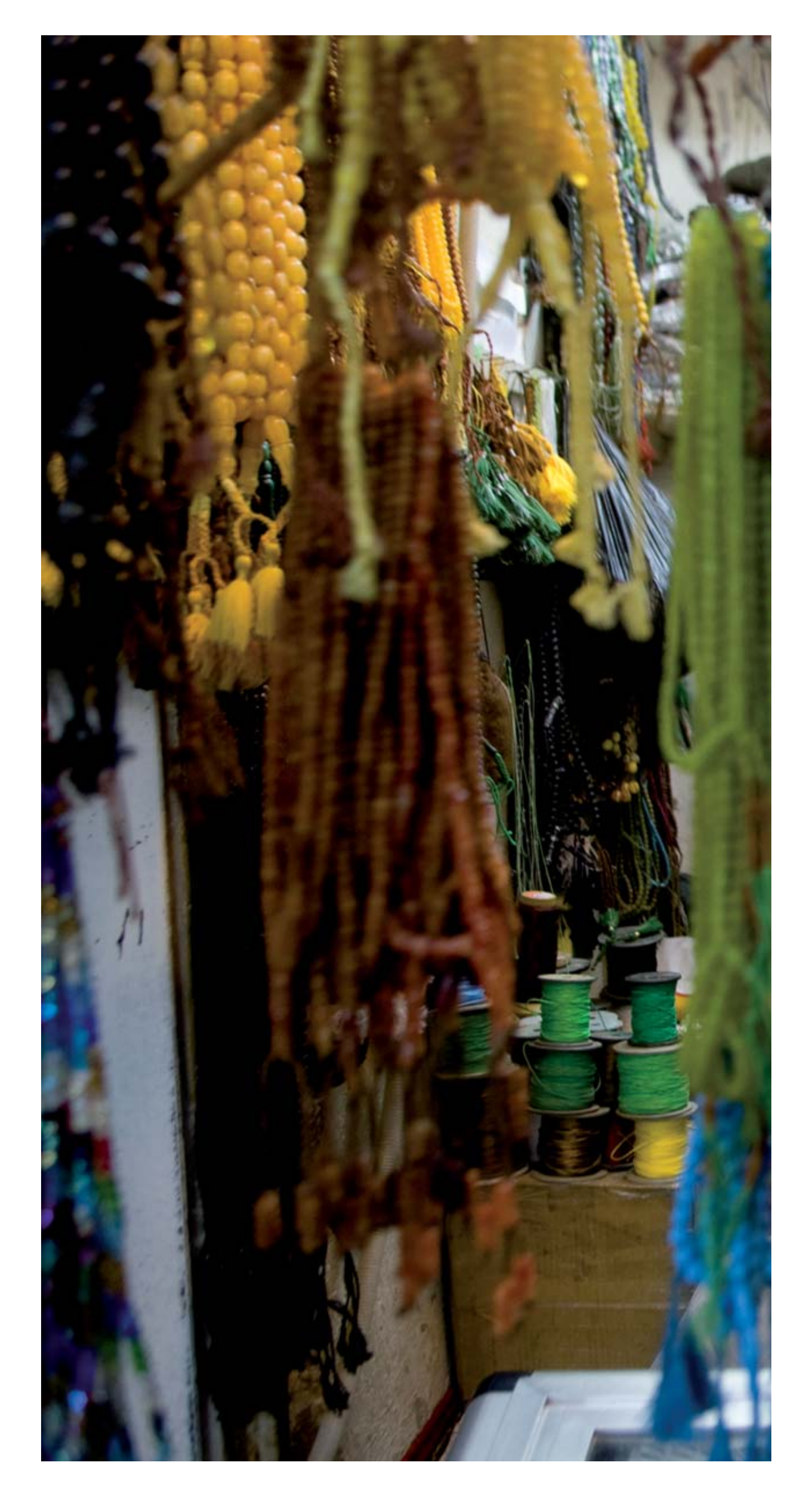
The shrine of Imam ʻAli not only provided the centre of Najaf but also contributed to its division, more or less orthogonally, into four quadrants by traditional thoroughfares, although these have been considerably expanded into broad streets and markets in recent years, while other roads have been cut right through old neighbourhoods and markets. Leading from the shrine to the original city gates, the traditional main streets are al-Tusi (north), al-Rasul (south), Zayn al-ʻAbidin (east-west north of the shrine) and Imam Sadiq (east-west south of the shrine). Contained between these streets are the four residential quarters of intramural Najaf, which are, proceeding counterclockwise, al-Mishraq (north-east), al-ʻAmara (north-west), al-Huwaysh (south-west) and al-Buraq (south-east). The fifth sector of the city is the Grand Bazaar (Suq al-Kabir), which presently comprises a broad longitudinal axis with several branches that extends from the shrine eastwards, ending at a modern square.

The rate of encroachment on the old city and destruction of its traditional fabric varies, depending on proximity to the sectors of intensive rebuilding, which are the shrine, the cemetery, the eastern edge of the city in the direction of Kufa, and the western edge, where hotels and resorts overlooking Bahr al-Najaf have recently been built. The enormous zone already occupied by the shrine is currently being tripled in size by a project intended to expand the educational institutions and various functional appendages of the shrine. It follows then that significant parts of all four quarters mentioned above, in addition to some of their markets, have been rebuilt, as Najaf embarks on a massive project of urban renewal.

For these reasons, our treatment of traditional Najaf will be largely typological rather than based on specific roads, alleys, monuments and residences. Of the four quarters, al-Mishraq and al-ʻAmara were the most favoured by prestigious scholarly and mercantile families, as they are located in the directions of Karbala to the north and Kufa to the east. Al-Mishraq, known since the second/eleventh century as the home and subsequent shrine of Shaykh al-Tusi, could in fact be the oldest quarter in Najaf. It also contains the residences of several prestigious Najafi families, including al-Milali, who were keepers (*sadins*) of the shrine throughout the thirteenth/nineteenth and early fourteenth/twentieth centuries. Unfortunately this quarter has been encroached upon since the 1930s, when a small square was cleared north of the shrine and a monumental gate to the shrine, named Bab al-Tusi, was created. In the 1970s this square was linked with the Wadi al-Salam cemetery by means of a road called al-Tusi, which divided al-Mishraq and al-ʻAmara quarters from one another. The Zayn al-ʻAbidin road, which runs west to east parallel to the Suq al-Kabir, has cut off the southern end of al-Mishraq quarter, contributing to the erection of medium-level buildings fronted by small modern shops.



Jeweller in the Grand Bazaar.



Shop at the Grand Bazaar selling prayer beads, one of the most popular souvenirs pilgrims bring home from their visit to Najaf.

Al-'Amara quarter was once replete with educational and charitable institutions, *madrasas* and *khanqas*, as well as with several tombs and shrines of great scholars, including Al Kashif al-Ghita', Sahib al-Jawahir, al-Qazwini and al-Jaza'iri. Most of these institutions have been completely rebuilt in recent years in a rather pristine and uniform style which can be seen in newly restored religious structures all over southern Iraq. Al-'Amara is also the residence of Shaykh 'Ali al-Sistani, the foremost *marja'* in Najaf, and the only *marja'* still residing within the walled city.

This quarter has suffered a great deal from the encroachments of the two modern roads mentioned above – al-Tusi and Zayn al-'Abidin – and even more from the creation of roads, parking lots and hotels intended to accommodate the visitors to the Wadi al-Salam cemetery, which lies to the north of this quarter. Given the expansion of both the shrine and the cemetery, it seems likely that this quarter will be the first to be completely modernized.

The south-western quarter of al-Huwaysh is today perhaps the best preserved, probably because of its distance from the vital centres of the shrine, the cemetery and Kufa. It is known as the residence of the al-Turayhi clan, who have long played an important role in the political and religious history of Najaf. Indeed today this quarter, particularly its inner sectors, contains the only neighbourhoods in Najaf that still retain something of the flavour of the old city. Al-Rasul Street, which begins at the shrine and continues past the southern city wall, separates al-Huwaysh from al-Buraq. The south-eastern corner of al-Buraq, adjacent to the city wall, was once occupied by the citadel of the city, which was converted into the *saray* (city hall) under the late Otttomans. Al-Buraq was one of the first quarters to benefit from early modern developments, east of the *saray*, where late Ottoman institutions were built, and south of the wall, where many of Najaf's clerical families settled.





One of Najaf's few remaining traditional 'abaya *weavers.*

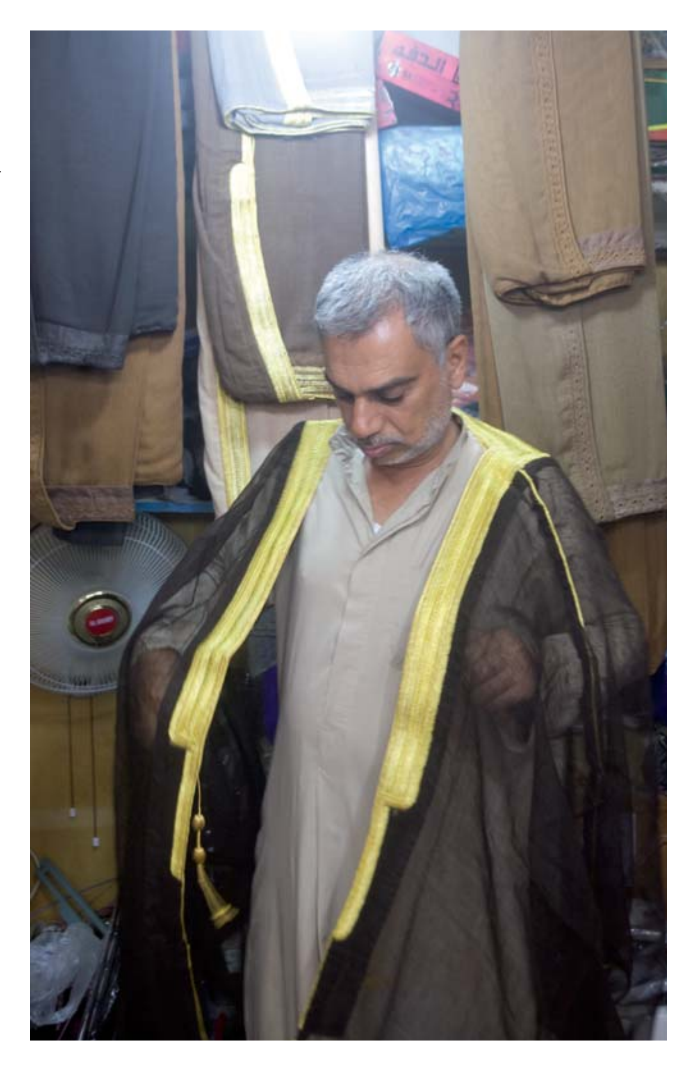
A refined form of dress: the Najafi ‘abaya

Among the specialities associated with Najaf is a form of high-quality and expensive men’s dress that is made in the traditional way and is greatly prized, particularly by residents of the Gulf. This is the Najafi ‘abaya, *a kind of cloak made of an extremely fine and hard-wearing pure wool fabric.*

‘When the material is black it is called a khashiyya, *and when it is brown it is called a* bisht,*’ says Sa’ad Ma’atush, a merchant in the al-‘Abashiyya souk. These names are used in Najaf, but they vary from place to place. Ma’atush says the* ‘abaya *was once considered to be an item of winter clothing. However, an Iranian who had settled in Najaf and who had used to make material for bundles decided to stop his work, converted the loom he had been using and began to make longer lengths of material instead. He produced a new kind of fabric that could be used for clothing worn in both the summer and winter, and by a process of refinement eventually produced what became the summer* ‘abaya.

Women called ghazilat *wash the wool and then dye and spin it to produce thread that is said to be ‘as fine as hair’ for weaving. It is the fineness of the thread and the hours of work required to produce it that determine the quality of the fabric, which is kept in sacks for protection before being sold at auction. According to demand, the fabric is then made to measure into finished* ‘abayas, *and the gold embroidery that is later added also contributes to the final price. A Najafi* ‘abaya *can cost up to IQD 2 million (Iraqi dinars) (about US$1,700), making this item of men’s clothing a luxury product.*

Until recently, Najafi ‘abayas *were given as presents to distinguished guests and worn by the tribal chiefs of the region, and people would come from far away to buy them in the souk. Today, they have to be ordered in advance. Since the opening of the Iraqi market to foreign imports, Najaf’s hand-made* ‘abayas *have faced competition from cheaper mass-produced versions imported from the United Kingdom and India. While there are more and more pilgrims coming to the city today, they tend to buy other, less heavy clothes and other kinds of souvenir. As a result, Najaf’s traditional* ‘abaya *industry has been declining, and the city now has fewer and fewer weavers.*



A Najafi khashiyya *intended for export. Made entirely by hand and embroidered with gold thread, Najafi* khashiyyas *are highly praised for their semi-transparent and lightweight woollen fabric.*



Najafis offer various means of transportation to weary pilgrims. Najaf's Grand Bazaar.



Cloth merchant in Najaf's Grand Bazaar.



Population and demographic change

Given that the shrine and its surrounding space made up about one-fifth of the city and the market another fifth, the population of the city, without its seasonal pilgrims, could not have numbered more than 30,000 at its greatest in premodern times. Census figures do not exist from before the second half of the thirteenth/nineteenth century, but travellers' accounts give population numbers that range considerably below this number. Ibn Battuta, who was quoted above, described Najaf as a clean and thriving city but did not estimate its population. In contrast the Portuguese traveller Pedro Texeira, who was in Najaf in 1012/1604, described a city in ruins, inhabited by little more than 500 people, a shockingly low number which must be attributed directly to the paucity of water, which itself resulted from the silting of the canal that had been built by the Ottoman Sultan Selim II.

Following the Wahhabi raid in 1215/1801, this paltry number was considerably augmented, to perhaps 20,000, by Iranian immigrants and especially by Bedouin and peasant Iraqis who had recently converted to Shi'ism. The Ottoman census that was conducted in 1282/1865 for the purpose of a military draft gives a figure of about 35,000. This increase should most likely be linked to the building of the Hindiyya Canal, which ensured a study supply of water to Najaf.[11] It also seems likely that the Ottomans themselves – soldiers, officials and their families – chose to live in the barracks and new quarters east of the city wall, clearly visible in Najaf's earliest photographs. In 1918, after the British occupation, Najaf had a population of 45,000.

Clearly then, the current population of Najaf – which is about 700,000 – represents massive recent immigration into the city. Most of this took place after 1970, with the new residents coming largely from the Iraqi desert, marshes and countryside. In order to accommodate this population increase and the needs of an increasingly modern society, Najaf had to expand just outside the eastern wall in the early fourteenth/twentieth century, and into more far-flung subdivisions and suburbs in the second half of the fourteenth/twentieth century. In 1349/1931 the municipality demolished the five gates of Najaf in order to allow for extramural expansion and to plan new neighbourhoods. This is confirmed by photographs of Najaf in the 1930s, which already show modern streets cut into the eastern quarters of al-Mishraq and al-Buraq and others just outside the wall in the direction of Kufa.



Shop selling shoes made in China in Najaf's Grand Bazaar.

By about 1965, newly planned quarters had emerged just east of the city wall, in the direction of Kufa, and just south of it, along the extension of Al-Rasul Street, a neighbourhood that is favoured by the clerical class. The 1980s witnessed further expansion and the creation of new neighbourhoods including al-Jadida, al-Hanana, al-Zahra', al-Muthanna, Zaynab, al-Ansar and Hindiyya. Other neighbourhoods have been given the modern names of professions or new products – such as al-Jami'a (University), al-Naft (Oil), al-Atibba' (Doctors), and al-Dubbat (Officers) – reflecting the modernization of the city and its social classes. This population shift was accompanied by the creation of markets, streets lined with businesses, government institutions, and educational and medical facilities to serve the residents of the new areas.



Small boutique selling women's fabrics. Tea is offered at all hours of the day.



Looking for the perfect wedding dress in the Grand Bazaar of Kufa.

Towards the end of the twentieth century Kufa and Najaf have joined into a single urban area that is commonly known to the outside world simply as Najaf. The two cities are connected along the ancient west-east axis, and many of the new residential quarters are located on this axis or on a secondary axis, directed north towards Karbala. The growth of this urban agglomeration has been so vast in the past two decades that the walled city of Najaf is now only about a thirtieth of the size, and contains about a twentieth of the population, of the entire contemporary city. In other words, modern life – including government institutions, hospitals, schools, two universities and modern businesses – has shifted decisively to the modern city. But a substantial sector of the economic activity of the modern city is still geared toward servicing the old cities of Najaf and Kufa, catering to the various needs of visitors and pilgrims.

The art of the perfumer

Although the crafts of perfume-making and medicinal preparation are now generally practised by different artisans, both fell until recently under the purview of the 'attar, *who was both perfumer and druggist.* 'Attars *have occupied a privileged place in bazaars since the Abbasid period if not before, providing their sophisticated female and male clientele with scents, creams, unguents, incense, cosmetics and medicinal compounds from places near and far. Even today at the Najaf Bazaar, the stalls and boutiques of perfumeries and apothecaries draw a steady line of patrons, both local residents and pilgrims, looking for the latest perfume or some tried-and-true concoctions for various ailments.*

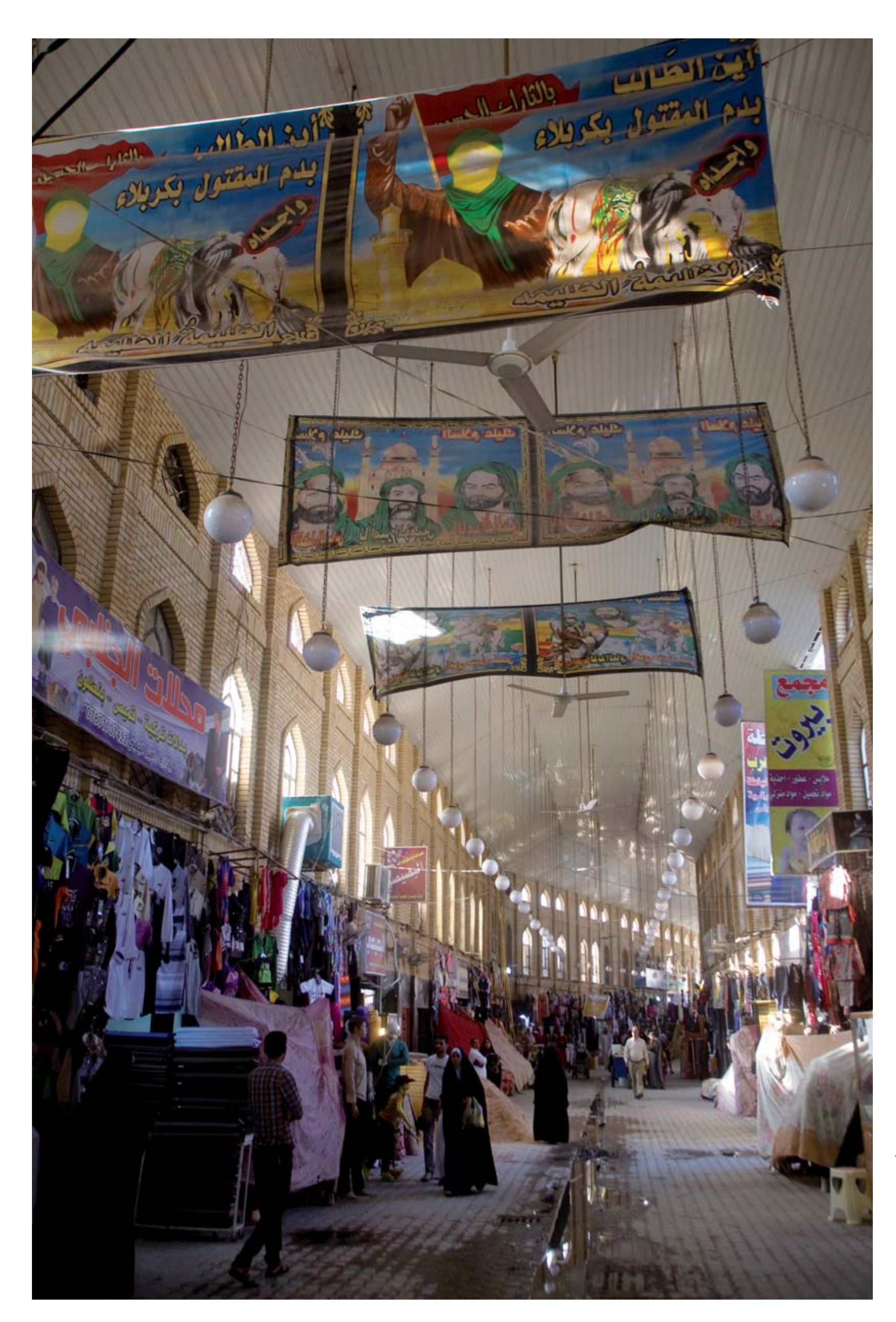
In earlier times, perfumers in Najaf produced their own scents, using mechanical or chemical processes to extract essences from various flowers and herbs and blend them into essential oils and perfumes. The extracts of flowers such as rose, jasmine, lily of the valley, violet, lavender, orange and lemon blossoms were blended in precise proportions with frankincense gum or with patchouli, vetiver or sandalwood oils in order to produce feminine and masculine perfumes with distinctive scents and lasting power.

Today, the perfumers of the Najaf Bazaar, practise a much simpler craft, largely based on the blending of various imported essential oils with alcohol in order to create traditional perfumes or match perfumes with an international brand name. Surrounded by numerous bottles and flasks of different colours, sizes and scents, the perfumer will concoct any perfume that the customer demands, or more commonly recommends to the customer new scents in vogue. Once the scent is selected and the size chosen, the perfumer uses a long glass suction tube to draw out a measure of one or more essential oils, release it into a decorative flacon, and dilute it in an oil or alcohol-based medium. The results are invariably spectacular.

The apothecary side of the 'attar *profession lost considerable ground in the fourteenth/twentieth century to modern drugs and pharmaceuticals, although recent trends towards 'natural' medicine and cosmetics have contributed to its ongoing continuity. Generally speaking the herbal and mineral concoctions sold by the* 'attar *are intended for cosmetic or medicinal purposes, both physical and psychological. Among the biggest-selling cosmetic items are henna, used to dye hands and feet; kohl, an eyeliner derived from galena; and frankincense* (luban), *which is used both as incense and as chewing gum. In addition the* 'attar *shop carries creams, tonics, lotions, powders and lipstick whose ingredients are only slightly different from modern cosmetics.*

As for medicinal herbs and compounds, the 'attar *functions as both a traditional druggist and also a folk doctor, who will often prescribe herbs and compounds for such ailments as fevers, intestinal problems, headaches and insomnia. Some seek traditional medicine as a complement to modern medicine, while others, who are either frustrated by 'chemical' prescriptions that have unpleasant side-effects or who simply cannot afford them, rely almost exclusively on folk medicine. A quick perusal of the contents of several* 'attar *shops in Najaf indicates that a substantial number of the medicaments are intended for sexual problems, depression, infertility and male baldness, ailments whose treatment inevitably invites a measure of faith on the side of the customer and some quackery on the side of the druggist. Some quality control of* 'attar *shops is maintained internally by the guild itself and externally through the supervision of the Ministry of Health.*





Shiʿi banners featuring the heroes of the Battle of Karbala greet customers along the main axis of the Grand Bazaar of Kufa.

Rose-flavoured Turkish delight.





The Grand Bazaar (al-Suq al-Kabir)

As with all Islamic cities, the commercial activity in Najaf was historically centred in one great market which catered to most of the city's needs in goods and services in premodern times, while smaller markets (*suwayqa*) served the local needs of specific quarters and neighbourhoods. Islamic cities typically also have a large vegetable market – often called Suq al-Khidar (which means green market) – in an open-air location just outside the city wall. Despite its relatively small size, Najaf possessed all these types of market. It had a Grand Bazaar, several smaller neighbourhood bazaars (although most of those that once existed have now vanished) and an outdoor vegetable market.

The early history of the Grand Bazaar is not substantiated by a great deal of historical or archaeological evidence, but we can assume that such a market existed from early on, since a central retail and wholesale bazaar is an invariable feature of Islamic cities. Ibn Battuta in the eighth/fourteenth century commented on Najaf's 'pleasant and clean souks', and it seems likely that these souks corresponded more or less to the current bazaar, although it has undoubtedly expanded considerably since then, in parallel with the expansion in the population and the number of visitors. Another historical reference to the Bazaar, from the beginning of the eleventh/seventeenth century, indicates that the Safavid Shah 'Abbas I expanded it, dedicating parts of it as a *waqf* to the shrine. As with most other bazaars, the Suq al-Kabir underwent numerous phases of building, expansion and even destruction before achieving the form it has today, which is in itself neither final nor definitive.

The main axis of the Grand Bazaar extends east–west for about 250 m from just outside the Main Gate or the Clock Gate of the shrine to a modern square called al-Maydan. This in turn leads to the Kufa Gate. According to historical sources, the central market was rebuilt during the Monarchy period in 1942, when it seems to have been widened, straightened, and its two sides were built in baked brick, with two levels and an attic zone. The lower level contained the shops, the upper level was used mainly for storage, and the attic zone provided light, ventilation and service access to the roof. Starting in 2010 the Grand Bazaar began to undergo a complete overhaul, which continues today in some sections. This provided it with monumental gates at either end, a splendid roof made of reflective metal alloy, and modern lighting. The process of rehabilitation will soon continue to the ancillary markets on Zayn al-'Abidin Street and beyond.



Kufa's fruit and vegetable market.

The structure and organization of the Grand Bazaar conform to a long-established tradition of Islamic bazaars, whereby goods and services are first divided into wholesale and retail, then subsequently organized by type, or in earlier times according to guilds (*sinf*). The structures in the Grand Bazaar consist of two basic types: a spine of shops of nearly identical size, intended for the retail trade; and courtyard-based structures with several adjoining shops, generally known as *khan* or *qaysariyya*, that usually cater to a single wholesale service or trade, such as cloth, copper or gold. This traditional form continues to some extent in the Najaf's Grand Bazaar, although some of the *qaysariyyas* have now become little more than an aggregate of retail shops.

Flat bread is still baked in traditional firewood ovens in Najaf's Grand Bazaar.



The organization of a bazaar by the type of goods or services also follows an important rule of segregation of goods and trades by value and level of contamination. The most valuable and least noxious trades, such as jewellery, are located closest to the Great Mosque or shrine, and the least valuable and most noxious services, such as leather working and pottery making, are located farthest from the centre. Typically therefore, a bazaar is organized in a series of fairly discrete units, with jewellers, booksellers, perfumers and sellers of religious paraphernalia near the centre; tailors, dealers in woollen and silk fabrics, and women's accessories around the middle; sellers of sweets, spices, dry goods and butchers farther out; and bakers, food makers, coppersmiths, blacksmiths and potters at the edges of the bazaar or in smaller branches away from the centre.

Some of this organization still obtains in the Grand Bazaar of Najaf, but the touristic orientation of the modern bazaar and its recent rebuilding have changed its form and especially its traditional functions. By and large, the main axis of the bazaar caters more to the needs of transient visitors and pilgrims than to those of the permanent residents of Najaf. Its merchandise seems heavily weighed towards first, expensive items including jewellery, watches, gifts and perfumes; and second, religious items – both generally Islamic and specifically Shi'i in nature – such as ornamental Qur'ans and books on religion, prayer rugs, prayer beads, *turbas* (clay tablets) for prostration, banners and flags, and images of Shi'i saints.


MIUM BANANAS

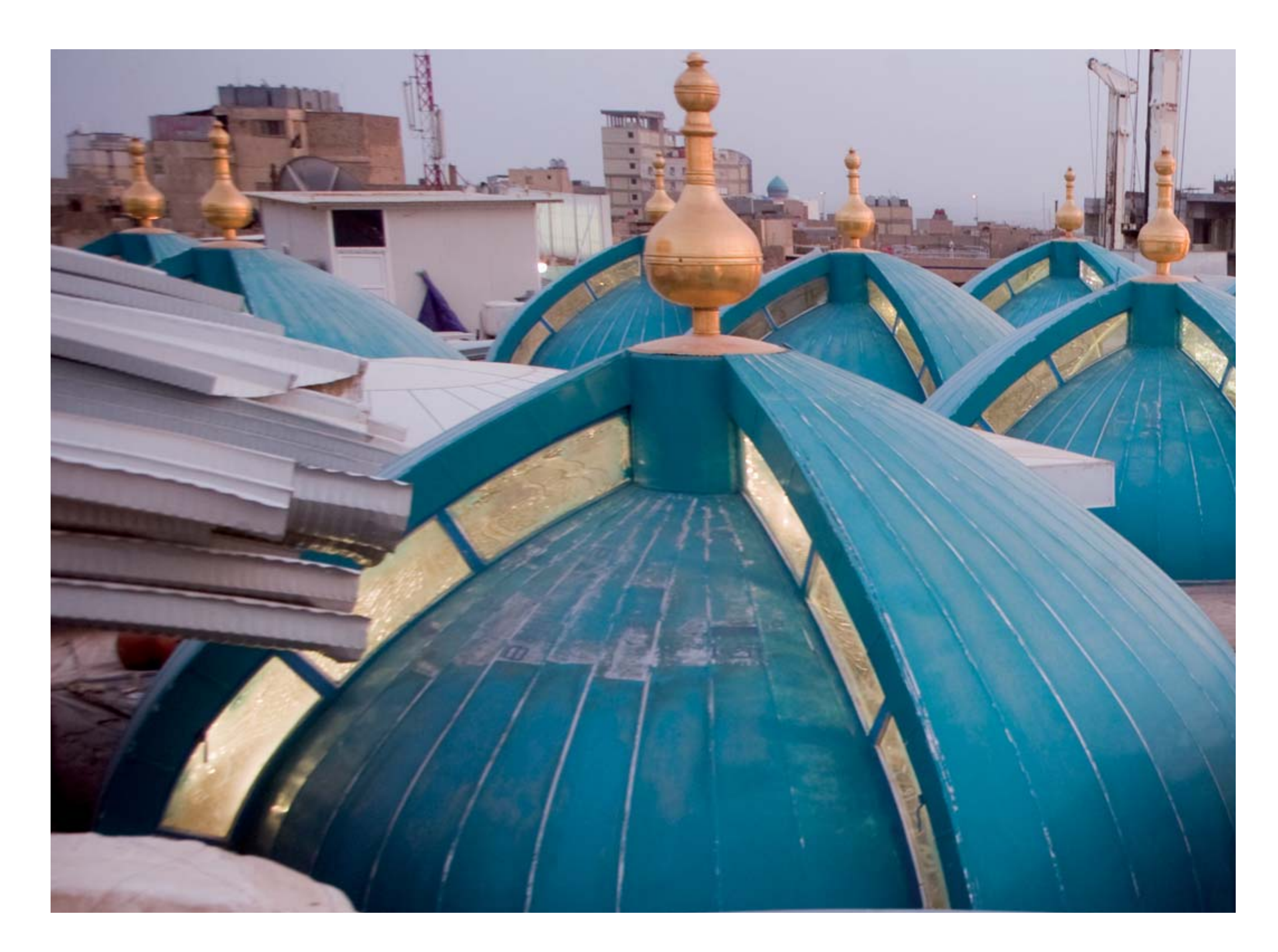


A fishmonger. Carps, kept alive in a pond (to the right off the photo) until they are cooked, are used to prepare the traditional masguf, *a recipe of fish grilled over an open fire.*

However the Grand Bazaar still retains a degree of authenticity in its basic organization, particularly in some of its ancillary branches. Suq al-Sagha, the gold and jewellery market, is located to the right upon leaving the shrine. Suq al-Tujjar, which sells upscale woollen and mixed fabrics for men's suits and traditional garb, is also located near the shrine, in a branch off the main road; you turn left to reach it from the main bazaar. Near it is Suq al-'Abaijiyya, whose traders historically specialized in making men's cloaks or *'abayas*, for both lay persons and Shi'i clerics. Further south, but still within the central bazaar, is Suq al-Huwaysh, which consists of about two dozen booksellers. Their tightly packed shelves, overladen with books, mainly in Arabic but with some Persian titles, are a testimony to Najaf's status as a city of learning.

Farther out in the bazaar are more functional markets, including Suq Al-Shabibi for shoes and women's wear; Suq Al-Masabikh for spices and dry goods; and Suq al-Qassabin for meat and dry goods. At the edge of the bazaar lies Suq al-Saffarin, with metal workers and hardware. The *suwayqa* of al-Mishraq sells vegetables and foodstuffs, originally for the residents of that quarter.

Kufa has its own bazaar, consisting of two main branches divided by a main road that leads to Najaf. The main northern branch of this bazaar contains some of the divisions and functions we have described for the Najaf Grand Bazaar, though with less emphasis on the tourist trade. The southern branch is mainly a market for vegetables, dry goods, poultry and meat. Other less traditional markets are interspersed on the newly expanded streets of Najaf and on the way to Kufa, including Suq al-Ghadir, Suq al-Ansar, Suq al-Jazira, Suq al-Zahra' and Suq al-Husayn. A huge mall is currently being constructed.



Vernacular architecture: destruction and a question of preservation

An aerial view of Najaf's traditional quarters shows tightly packed houses arranged around central courtyards, with narrow roads or dead-end alleys separating them. This is almost the exact opposite of the spatial organization seen in the modern residential quarters of the city. Little distinguishes the mud-plastered exterior of these houses, except for an occasional high window or an elaborate wooden door. Those entering through the door descend two or three steps, since the street level has risen, into a vestibule that leads to the central courtyard or *hosh*. Its dimensions determine the overall size of the house. Usually consisting of two floors and one or two basements (*sirdab*), the better houses of Najaf follow a fairly uniform plan, where two living units – the guest unit (*barrani*) and the family unit (*dakhlani*) – are laid out respectively at the entrance and across the courtyard, ensuring the proper segregation followed in all Islamic houses. Typically these units have a tripartite composition, with two rooms (*odas*) flanking a central *iwan* (vaulted space with a large arched opening). The *iwan* opens onto a roofed rectangular space (*tarma*), at the end of which a two or three columned porch (*talar*) overlooks the courtyard.

In contrast to its blank exterior, the traditional Najafi house is rather well appointed internally, with both natural vegetation and ornamental features in brick, tile and woodwork. The courtyard is paved in decorative brick patterns, while the walls, especially of the *iwan*, are occasionally covered in glazed tiles. But perhaps

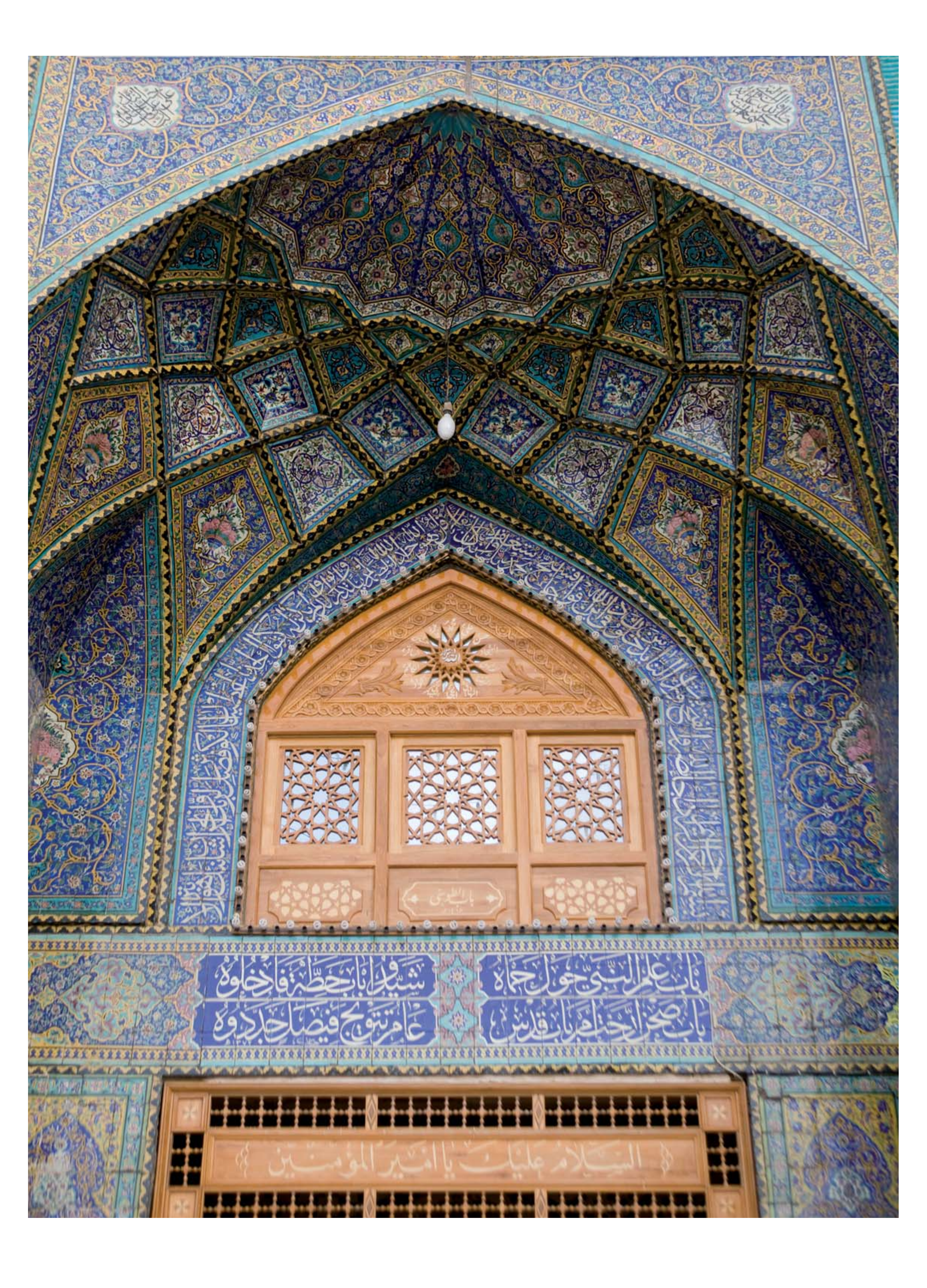


Modern domes of Al-Ra's Mosque, Najaf.

the most typical mode of ornament is decorated woodwork, carved into graceful *muqarnas* capitals and turned and joined to form openwork screens (*mashrabiyyas*), or even small enclosed balconies overlooking the courtyard, *shanashil*.

Traditional Najafi houses display quite ingenious adaptation to the exceedingly harsh climate, which is marked by scorching hot summers and cool winters. The inhabitants of the house move seasonally between its various spaces. The closed *odas*, heated with braziers, are used in the winter; semi-open *iwans* and *tarmas* provide pleasant living spaces in the short spring and autumn; and the cool underground *sirdab* is well adapted for sleeping during the hot summer months. In addition, most Najafi houses also utilize natural air flow by means of *bad-girs* (wind catchers), which are vertical shafts with openings that capture the north-western cooling winds and conduct them downwards through the *iwan* and out the courtyard. This traditional house form can only be found today in some houses in the old city; elsewhere, modern villas or apartments is the norm.

It is our hope that the current attention being given to Najaf by the highest cultural authorities in Iraq will have a beneficial impact on the preservation not just of its main monuments and bazaars, but also of some sectors of its intramural quarters and some of the traditional houses in them. While the expansion of the shrine is desirable and the modernization of parts of old Najaf is inevitable, we can still hope that some prominent houses, and entire streets, will be preserved for later generations.



باب علم النبي حول حماه
شيد وباب حطة فادخلوه
عام تتويج فيصل جددوه
السلام عليك يا امير المؤمنين



Religious architecture in Najaf & Kufa

Detail of Bab al-Tusi (northern gate to the shrine). The two lines of inscribed poetry date the gate to the Coronation of King Faisal of Iraq in 1921.

Golden dome of the Great Mosque of Kufa.



Detail of tile work on the northern inner wall of the shrine, representing a formal garden underneath a flowering grove.

In dealing with the history and urbanism of Najaf we have touched on the shrine of Imam ʻAli, which is unavoidable in view of its unmatched prominence in all aspects of Najaf's history, culture and religious life. Whether described by Ibn Battuta in the eighth/fourteenth century or viewed today in the fifteenth/twenty-first century, the shrine forms the urban and architectural nucleus of the city, and radiates its spiritual aura to its farthest corners and beyond. This chapter discusses the shrine as an architectural monument, examining its historical phases, architectural forms and impressive ornament. In addition we discuss more briefly the Great Mosque of Kufa, the al-Sahla Mosque and other lesser mosques and shrines. The chapter concludes by examining the sources of patronage and the visual impact of Najaf's religious architecture.

The shrine: structural chronology

Architecture lives in the present, and its fabric undergoes constant and continuous conservation, restoration, rebuilding, destruction and addition. This is truer in shrines than in any other architectural monuments, due to their intensive usage, the need for expansion, and the merits derived from contributing to them. These trends are even stronger than usual in Iraqi and Iranian Shiʻi shrines, which tend to be sheathed in delicate and quite perishable materials, more suited for the decoration of interiors than exteriors. When decorative materials such as tile mosaic, mirror work, painted wood and semi-precious inlays are exposed to some of the harshest weather on earth, they suffer, and as a result they must undergo constant conservation and restoration if their quality is to be maintained.



Inner core of Najaf's shrine, with its golden dome, twin minarets and Golden Iwan.

As it stands today, therefore, the shrine of Imam 'Ali betrays little of its numerous early building phases – from the second/eighth to the tenth/sixteenth century – because it has been thoroughly rebuilt between the eleventh/seventeenth century and the present. Nevertheless, a brief overview of the shrine's architectural development seems warranted in order to reaffirm its continuous historical presence in Najaf, and the care and attention that were lavished upon it by kings, sultans, sovereigns and wealthy devout people throughout its history.

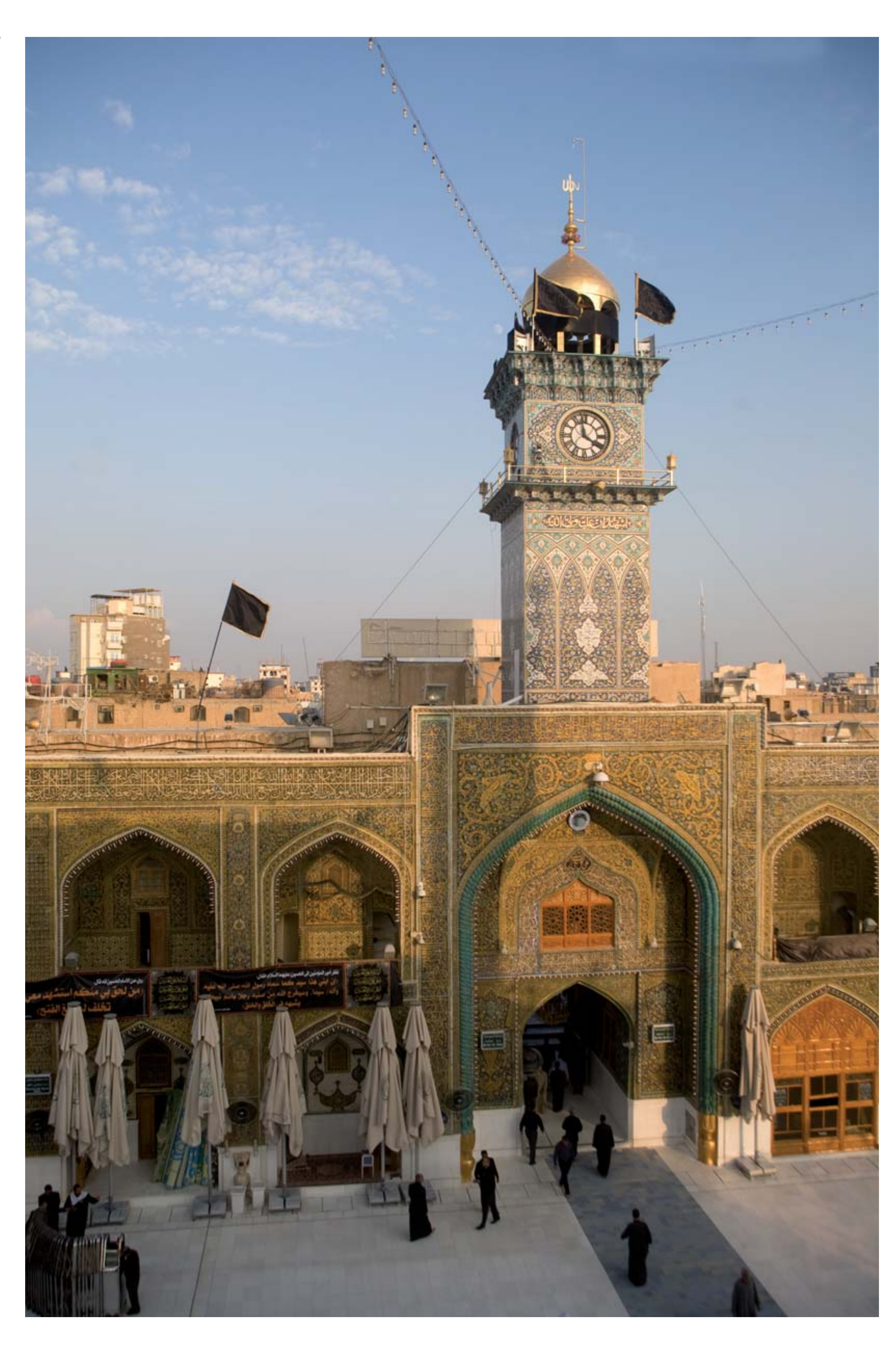
It is commonly accepted that the first structure to be built over the tomb of Imam 'Ali was by the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid in 169/786, and most agree that this was a simple building with a small green mudbrick dome over the tomb. In 235/850 Caliph al-Mutawakkil had this structure torn down and the site flooded, a very unusual act among Abbasid caliphs and later Muslim sovereigns,



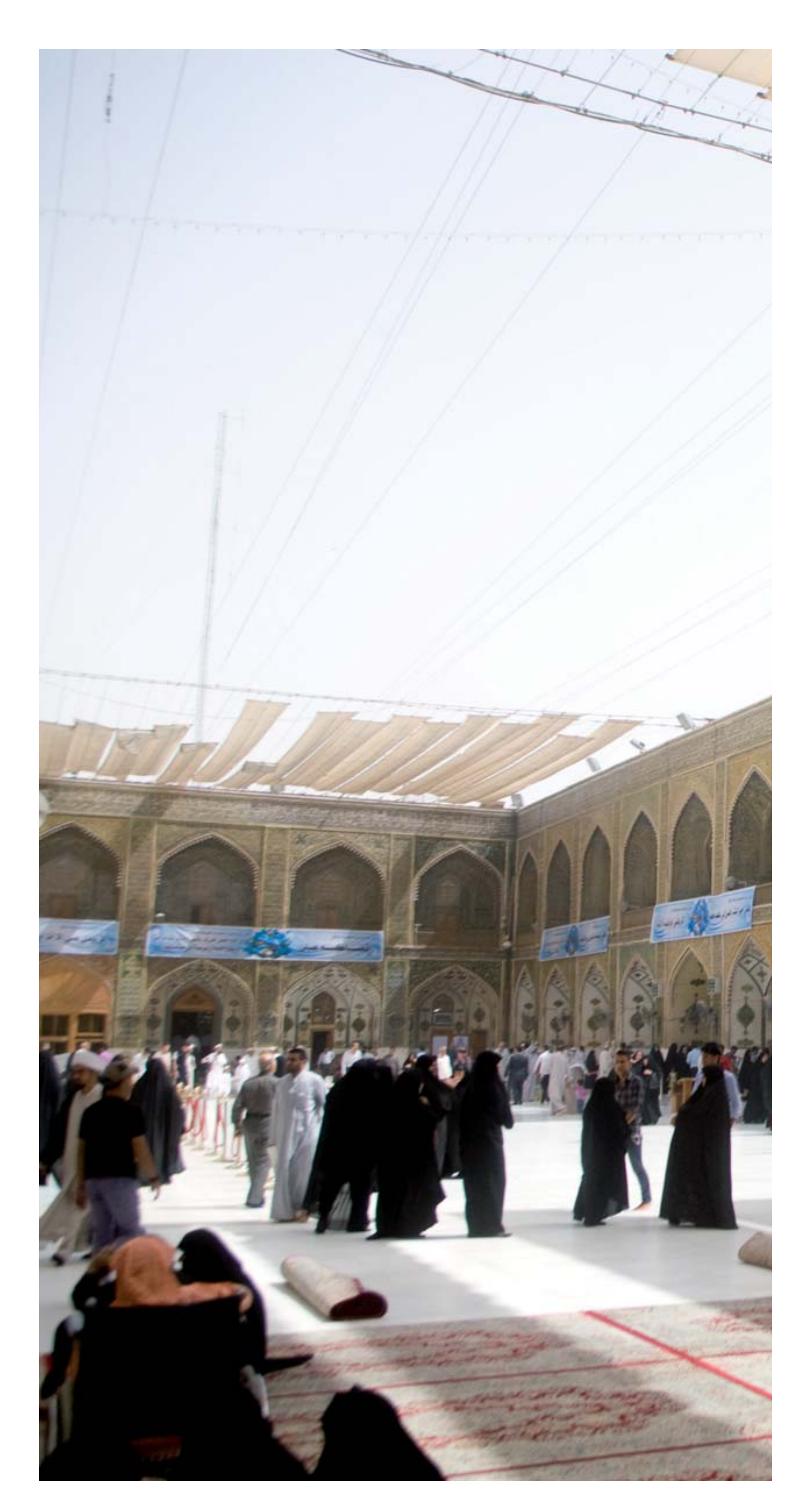
Model of the shrine of Imam 'Ali showing the projected additions.



even Sunnis, who were invariably courteous toward the shrine and its people. Al-Mutawakkil's destruction might not have been total, for in 272/886 an Abbasid governor contributed a casket (*sanduq*) for the shrine, suggesting that parts of it had survived. The fourth/tenth and first half of the fifth/eleventh centuries signalled the rise of several Shi'i dynasties in Syria and Iraq, many of whom restored the shrine. For example, in 310/923 the Hamdanid ruler of Mosul and Aleppo, Abu'l-Hayja', rebuilt the shrine as 'a large dome with raised corners on all sides'.[12] This could have been a dome raised on a platform, with porticoes on all four sides, a form that was common in Shi'i shrine architecture for many centuries.



The Clock Portal as seen from the courtyard.



Eastern courtyard of the shrine with pilgrims, showing the Clock Tower.

In 369/980 this early shrine was expanded by ʻAdud al-Dawla (see Chapter 1), the Shiʻi sovereign of the Buyid dynasty that presided over the Abbasid Caliphate from 945 to 1055. A decorative cenotaph was built above the burial site and a new dome was erected above it, reputedly decorated on the inside with hanging textiles and carpets. Although this Shiʻi dynasty was succeeded in 446/1055 by the stridently Sunni Great Saljuqs, a measure of tolerance towards Shiʻism prevailed, and in 478/1086 the Saljuq Sultan Malikshah bestowed substantial gifts on the shrines in both Najaf and Karbala. These acts of benevolence continued till the end of the Abbasid dynasty in 656/1258, particularly during the reign of Caliph al-Nasir, who was known for his Shiʻi sympathies.

Although the Mongols viciously sacked Baghdad and other cities, they spared religious sites generally and those of Ahl al-Bayt in particular. For example, in 665/1267 the vizier ʻAla' al-Din Juwayni contributed various buildings and installations to serve the needs of the pilgrims, while Sultan Ghazan Khan, added to the shrine a wing for the *sayyids*, called Dar al-Siyada, in 702/1303. This structure, which was appended to the west of the shrine, is most likely the current location of the Masjid al-Ra's, since a splendid Ilkhanid *mihrab* has been discovered there. This mosque itself has been completely rebuilt in recent years, and the Ilkhanid *mihrab* placed in storage, later to be exhibited in the projected shrine museum. This is a flat glazed ceramic *mihrab* of a type that was produced in Kashan between the second half of the seventh/thirteenth and the first half of the eighth/fourteenth centuries.

When Ibn Battuta visited the shrine in 727/1326, he described it as a magnificent edifice:


الأمانة العامة للعتبة العلوية المقدسة
دار القران الكريم
الجلسة القرآنية



A north-east view of the shrine, its golden dome and iwan, *and the awnings that provide shade for the pilgrims.*

It is extremely well built with tiled walls, which is similar to our zillij *but has brighter hues and finer ornament. Once a visitor enters, he is ordered to kiss the threshold* (al-'ataba)*, which is made of silver, as are its two pillars. Then he enters the dome, whose floor is covered with rugs of silk and other materials, and in it hang lamps of gold and silver, large and small. At the centre of the dome is a square platform covered in wood, which is sheathed with engraved sheets of gold with silver nails, so much so that little of the wood shows through. The platform is slightly lower than a man's height, and above it are three tombs, whom they allege to be the tombs of Adam, peace be upon him, the second for Noah, and the third is the tomb of 'Ali, may God be pleased with him. Between these tombs are basins of gold and silver filled with rose water, musk and other perfumes, in which the visitor dips his hand and anoints his face as a blessing.*[13]

The shrine Ibn Battuta described suffered a huge fire in 755/1354 which seems to have consumed most of it.

Within a few years, however, the shrine was completely rebuilt, most likely in the Jala'irid period, possibly in 760/1358, by the Jala'irid sultan Uways Ibn Hasan, who had his father's remains interred in the north-eastern corner of the courtyard. At the beginning of the ninth/fifteenth century the great Mongol ruler Timur visited Najaf and Karbala. He offered gifts and endowments, and ordered the restoration of their shrines. Once again, the shrine was subjected to considerable damage and looting in the middle of the ninth/fifteenth century, this time at the hands of the fanatic Shi'i prince al-Musha'sha'i, who is said to have turned its dome into a kitchen.[14]

In the tenth/sixteenth and eleventh/seventeenth centuries Najaf was contested by the Ottomans and the Safavids, with the shrine benefiting from the patronage of both sides. Shortly after the Ottoman takeover, Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent visited Karbala and Najaf (in 1534 CE) and bestowed considerable gifts on the shrines. It seems likely that he also restored the shrine, but there are no inscriptions or explicit references to his having done so. Indeed, with the exception of the previously mentioned Ilkhanid *mihrab* and some tombstone inscriptions, there are no pre-Safavid architectural remains in the entire shrine.

Although the Safavid ruler Shah Isma'il visited the Najaf shrine in 913/1508, the earliest Safavid restorations of the shrine come from the eleventh/seventeenth century, particularly the reigns of Shah 'Abbas I and his grandson Safi al-Din. Shah 'Abbas I twice visited Najaf, where in addition to the various public works mentioned above, he is also known to have paid special attention to the shrine of Imam 'Ali. In 1032/1623 he commissioned a group of 500 men to rebuild the shrine, a project that was completed by his grandson Shah Safi al-Din (d.1031/1642) in 1041/1632, when he had his vizier Mirza Taqi al-Din Jihan renew the dome and expand the courtyard. He also added a hospital, a kitchen and a hospice to the shrine, ensuring the functionality of a place that had now become the destination of numerous pilgrims. Toward the end of the Safavid period, in 1125/1713, the cenotaph (*sanduq*) was restored, and in 1128/1716 the dome was stabilized; the latter date being the earliest inscription on the shrine.[15]

Although later phases in the twelfth/eighteenth and thirteenth/nineteenth centuries contributed quite considerably to the ornament and sense of monumentality of the shrine, they do not seem to have significantly altered the plan and perimeter laid out under the Safavids. Undoubtedly the most important of these restorations was by Nadir Shah (1148/1736–1159/1747). His gilding of the shrine's dome and minaret began in 1154/1742 and ended eighteen months later in 1156/1743. These works are documented by an inscription on the *iwan* of the eastern portal, which gives his name, al-Mutawakkil 'ala al-Mulk al-Qadir al-Sultan Nadir, and specifically refers to the dome as *'al-qubba al-munawwara wa'l-rawda al-mutahhara'* (the illuminated dome and the purified garden), with the date 1156/ 1743.[16]

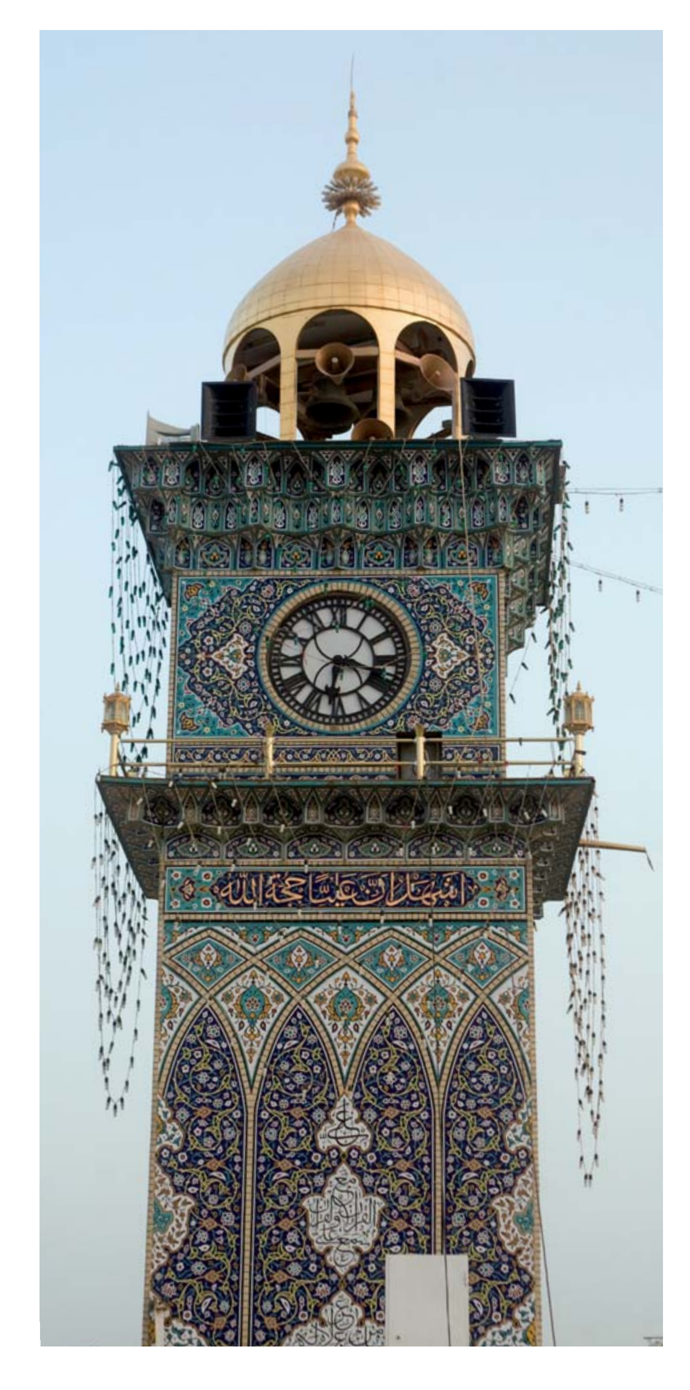
At around the same time Gohar-Shad Begum, Nadir Shah's wife, contributed 100,000 gold dinars to rebuild the walls and courtyard of the shrine, although her patronage was apparently subsumed under that of her husband. These works certainly included retiling the western or main *iwan* of the shrine, whose faience tile is the oldest surviving in the whole complex. In addition, the vaulting of this *iwan* was rebuilt in 1158/1745 as a gilt *muqarnas* vault of nine tiers, nearly unique in all Islamic architecture. Indeed, this was the magnificent shrine of Imam 'Ali that was described by the first European visitors in the twelfth/eighteenth and thirteenth/nineteenth centuries, including Carsten Niebuhr in 1765, William Loftus in 1853 and Johann Ludwig Burckhardt in 1864.



Boys attending a funeral in the shrine.

Between the thirteenth/nineteenth and fifteenth/ twenty-first centuries the shrine, including its various annexes, was so frequently renovated that it is perhaps clearer to deal with different units separately, from the outside in. The exterior of the shrine, in particular its portals, has been the subject of numerous periods of rebuilding, mainly dating to the thirteenth/nineteenth and fourteenth/ twentieth centuries. The Main Portal, facing east, also called the Clock Portal (Bab al-Sa'a), was rebuilt in 1279/1863 by the Ottoman sultan Abdulaziz. The Clock Tower itself was gifted to the shrine by the Iranian minister of the Qajar Sultan Nasir al-Din in 1305/1888. (The clock mechanism was made in the United Kingdom.) The Portal of Muslim Ibn 'Aqil, just a few metres north of the Clock Portal, was also rebuilt by the same Ottoman sultan in the same year, 1279/1863. Bab al-Qibla (The Portal Oriented to Mecca), facing south, was renovated in 1288/1872, according to a poetic inscription in the name of Shaykh 'Abbas Hasan Al Kashif al-Ghita', and its tile work seems to have been restored in 1960 CE, according to a small inscription at its top. Bab al-Faraj (The Portal of Deliverance), also known as Bab al-'Amara, facing west, does not seem to predate the thirteenth/nineteenth century, and may have been created in 1278/1862. It also carries a later inscription, from 1971 CE, suggesting restoration. Finally Bab al-Tusi, in the middle of the northern enclosure wall, has a very long history, but it was entirely rebuilt in the thirteenth/nineteenth century and restored once in 1935 CE and again in 2004 CE.

The courtyard of the shrine was previously full of tombs, which was common practice in most shrines, but in 1205/1791 these tombs were paved over by building a higher stone floor above them and leaving them in a cellar space. This project was financed by a Persian donor, whose name, Mir Khayrallah al-Irani, and the date of the project were once inscribed in a stone plaque that had been placed on the right side of the Clock Portal.



The Clock Tower built in 1888. The clock mechanism was a gift from the United Kingdom; the tiling was added later.

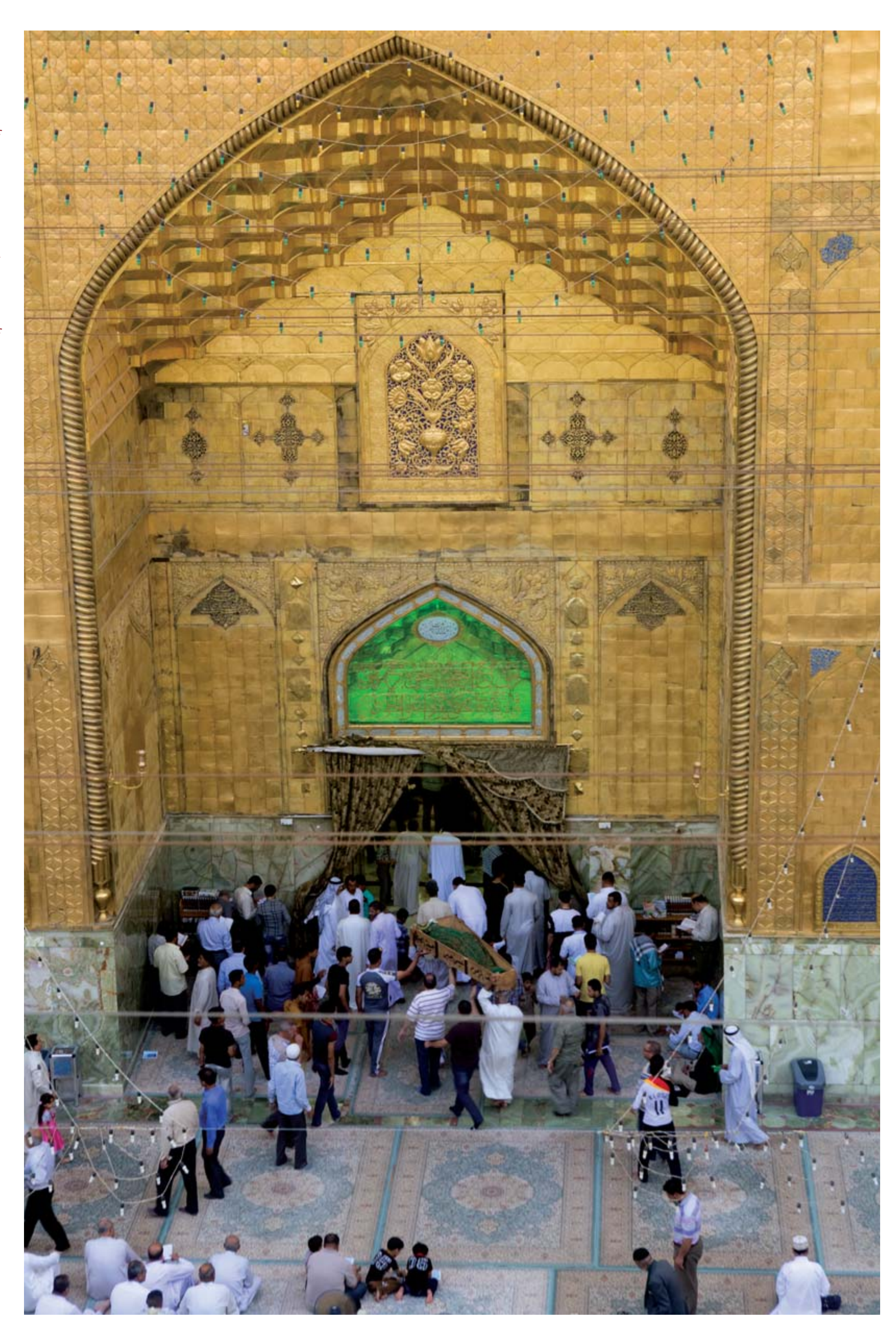
The courtyard pavement was renovated several more times: in 1897 CE by Sultan Abdul-Hamid II; in 1934 CE during the Hashemite monarchy; in 1950 CE by a leader of the India-based Bohra Isma'ili community, who replaced the stone paving with marble; and in 1981 CE when this marble was replaced with Italian marble. Finally in 2009 CE this marble was replaced by Italian marble of superior quality, which is now largely covered in carpeting.

Since the Safavid period, if not before, the northern and western sides of the shrine's courtyard have been expanded to accommodate two mosques, two *madrasas*, one *takiyya* (a Sufi *madrasa*) and a library. The largest of these is Masjid al-Ra's or Riwaq Abi-Talib, located on the west side of the enclosure, attached to the central shrine. It was most likely first built in the early eighth/fourteenth century, and renovated several times: by Shah 'Abbas I in 1032/1623, Nadir Shah in 1158/1745, and Sultan Abdul-Hamid II in 1888. In 2006 CE all the old remains were torn down and a spacious and quite opulent mosque resting on twenty-four columns was built. It seems that this new expansion also took up most of the Takiyya al-Bektashiyya, an Ottoman structure intended as a *madrasa* and place for meditation for the Bektashi Sufi order.

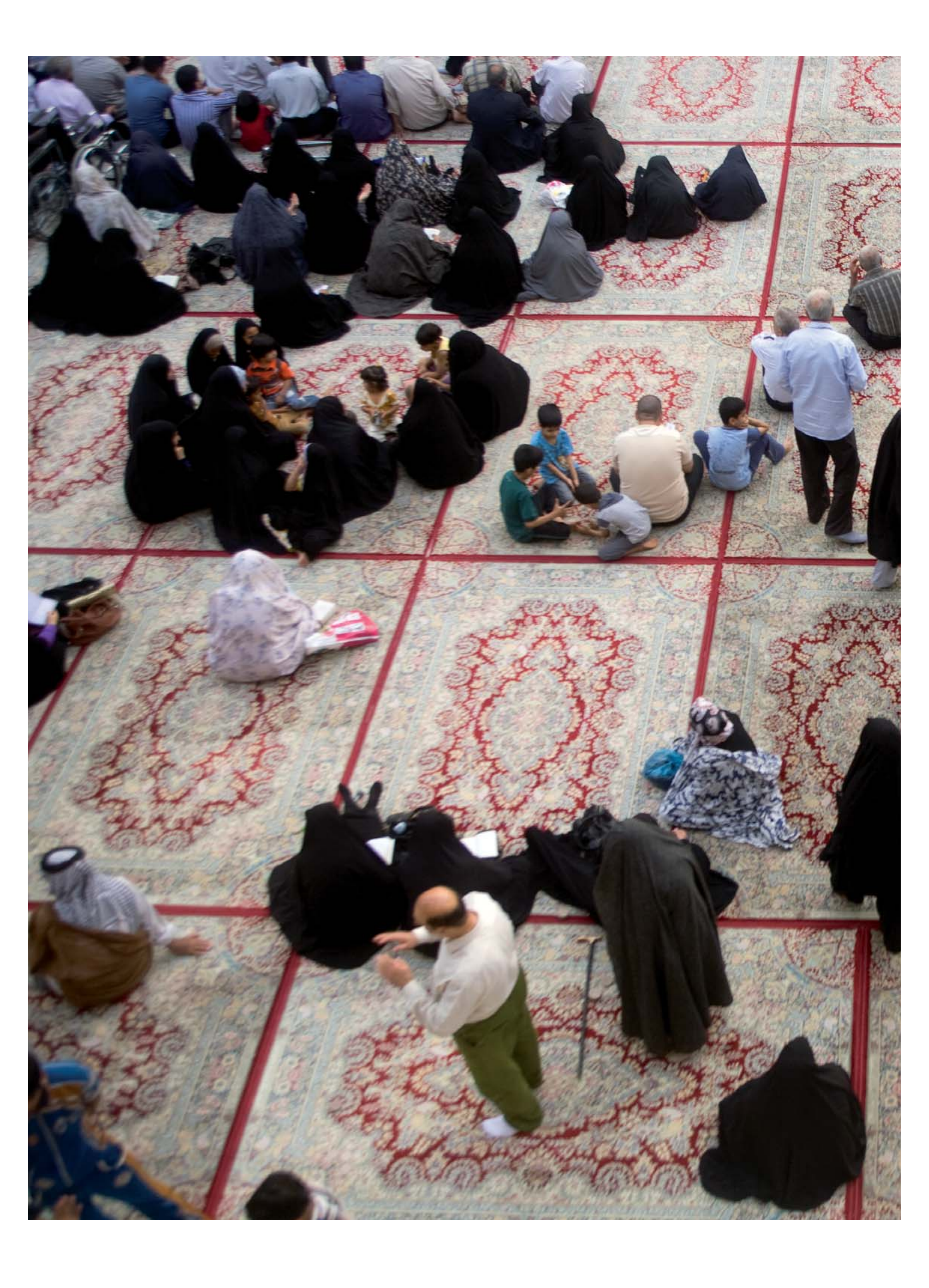
The mosque of 'Umran Ibn Shahin, possibly dating to the fourth/tenth century, is located in the north courtyard, next to Bab al-Tusi. It was rebuilt in the tenth/sixteenth century, possibly under the Ottomans, and once again in the eleventh/seventeenth century under Shah 'Abbas I, who had parts of its interior demolished in order to regularize the form of the courtyard. It was finally completely rebuilt in 2007 CE. The Masjid al-Khadra', sometimes also called the Madrasa al-Khadra', at the north-eastern corner of the courtyard, may date to the Safavid period. In 1949 CE part of this mosque was demolished in order to expand the road north of it, and the remaining part was restored as a small mosque, which was renovated one final time in 2006 CE. It is entered from both an exterior entrance in the eastern wall of the shrine and an interior entrance at the north-eastern corner of the courtyard. Adjacent to it is the Madrasa Al-Gharawiyya, which is said to date back to the Safavid period, although there is no epigraphic evidence for that date. Until quite recently it served as a *husayniyya* (a specifically Shi'a place of worship), but after a major renovation between 2003 and 2009 CE it has reopened as a major religious school with modern facilities on three floors.

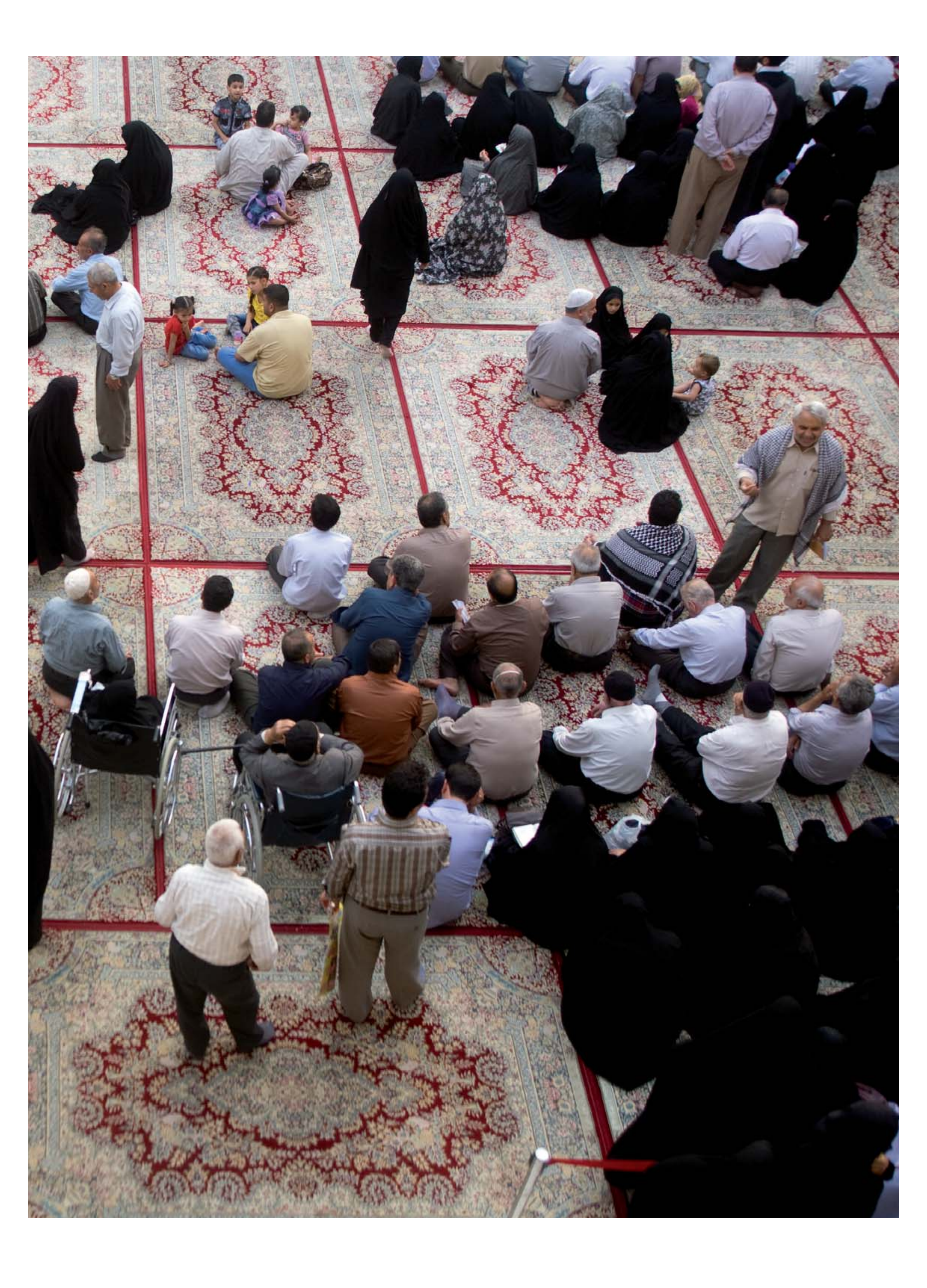
Finally, a library at the north-west side of the enclosure, which may have been first founded by the Buyid sultan 'Adud al-Dawla in the late fourth/tenth century, is mentioned again in the seventh/thirteenth and eighth/fourteenth centuries, when it was reopened after a fire. Expanded in the thirteenth/nineteenth century, the library was reopened in 2005 CE after a major renovation project that turned the space into three storeys and a basement. Dedicated with an inscription as *maktabat al-marqad* (library of the shrine) at its exterior entrance, the library now functions as an up-to-date library of books and manuscripts, with facilities for storage, restoration, microfilming, documentation and study for both men and women.

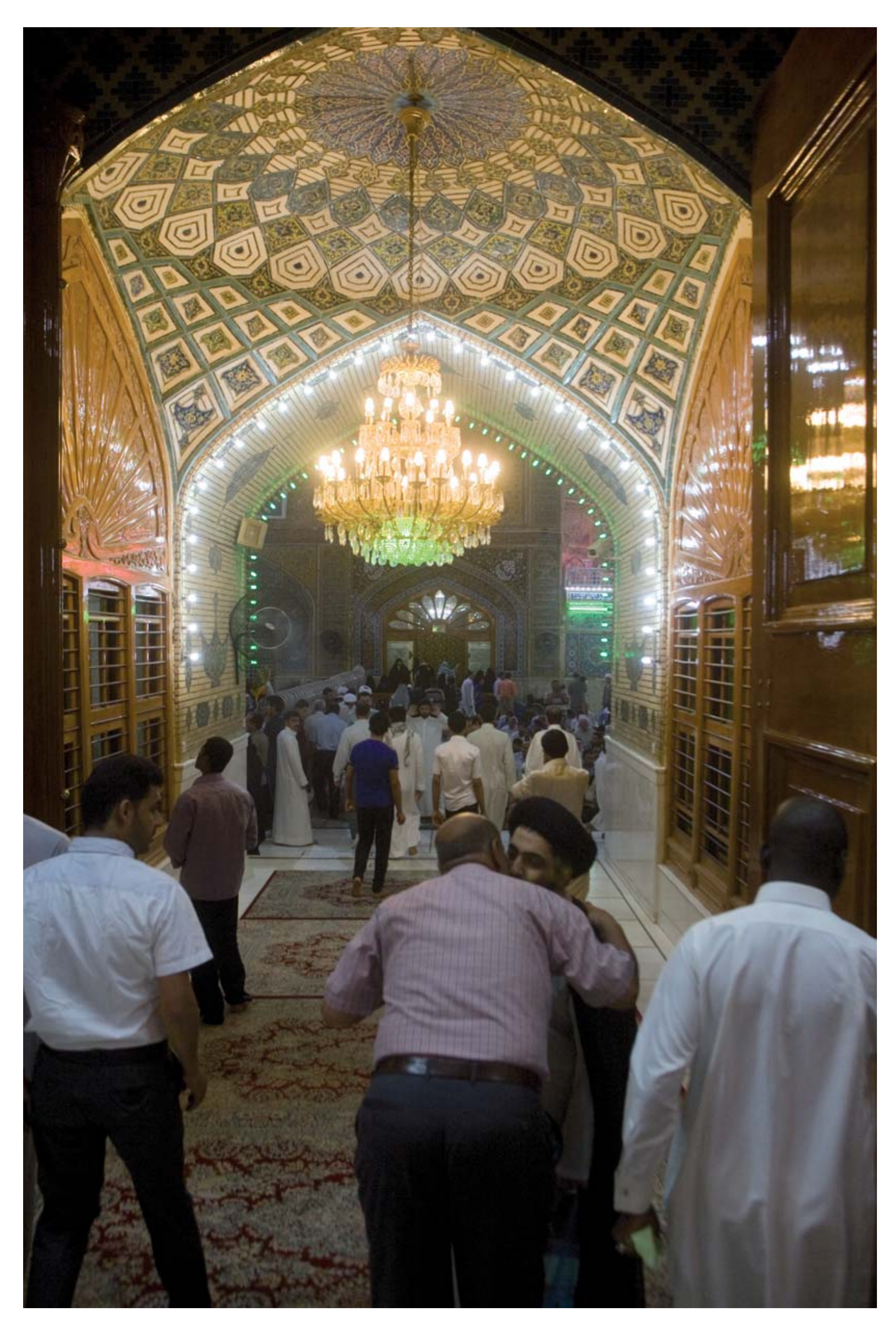
Gatherings of visitors to the shrine are marked by congeniality and diversity. Northern courtyard as seen from the roof. ◢



The Golden Iwan. This iconic feature of the shrine represents a nearly unique case of a muqarnas *vault that is covered in gold. A funerary procession enters the shrine to bring the deceased into the spiritual presence of the imam.*







Corridor leading from Bab al-Tusi to the shrine's courtyard.

Balcony of the shrine's gold and blue enamelled minaret.

An image of the shrine today

The golden dome of the shrine glistens from a great distance, becoming larger and more luminous with every step the pilgrim takes towards it. The shrine ceases to be visible when you enter the Grand Bazaar, which offers the most direct access from its eastern side. When it appears again a tall wall with minimal ornamentation rises up in front of you, but the view is dominated – in height, design and colour – by a massive portal, the Clock Portal, with the lesser portal of Muslim Ibn 'Aqil to its right. A broad street – continuation of Imam Sadiq Street – separates you from the shrine and allows a better view of the intricate ornament of the portals. You take off your shoes at one of the *kishwaniyyas* (shoe storage locations) and pass through the door, along with throngs of pilgrims, men and women, from the very old to the very young.

You will note immediately that the street level has risen about 60 cm above the floor level of the courtyard, which itself has been paved over numerous times. You step over the threshold, touch the door, and descend a few steps into a spacious, marble-paved courtyard. The first sight, and many after that, will take your breath away. Gold upon gold! No monument you have seen before is likely to compare with the sight of the soaring bulbous golden dome, flanked by two golden minarets of about the same height, and anchored by a massive *iwan* with a golden *muqarnas* vault. Imagine that you stand in awe and hope the moment lasts a lifetime.

Although, as we have seen above, the shrine has undergone numerous periods of renovation and rebuilding, a plan made in 2010 CE would differ from the one made by Burckhardt in the middle of the thirteenth/nineteenth century only in details. The core has not changed: a vast square oriented to the cardinal directions that surrounds in rhythmic succession two smaller squares, the innermost of which supports the dome above the cenotaph (*darih*). The design is centrifugal: the shrine, even the entire city, converges upon the *darih*; and centripetal, as the *darih* radiates in a series of squares to the enclosure and beyond. This sense of radiance reinforces the luminosity of the ornament and the golden dome, creating a perfectly balanced image of an ideal world. This is where the imam resides.

A thorough description of the shrine – its plan and design components, ornament and inscriptions – would take an entire book, and this is a book that needs to be written, since there is no such description that we know of, and no space for such detail here. Rather, the following is a summary descriptive analysis that proceeds as follows. First there is a brief description of the shrine through its modern plan and section, from outside to inside; second, it outlines the courtyard and its main *iwan*; and third, the ornament and inscriptions of the domed shrine.

Whether in aerial view or in plan, the shrine appears today as a large square with double walls that surround on three sides a smaller square, which in turn encloses a smaller square with a dome at its centre. This plan type is known in other Shi'i shrines in Iraq, including the shrines in

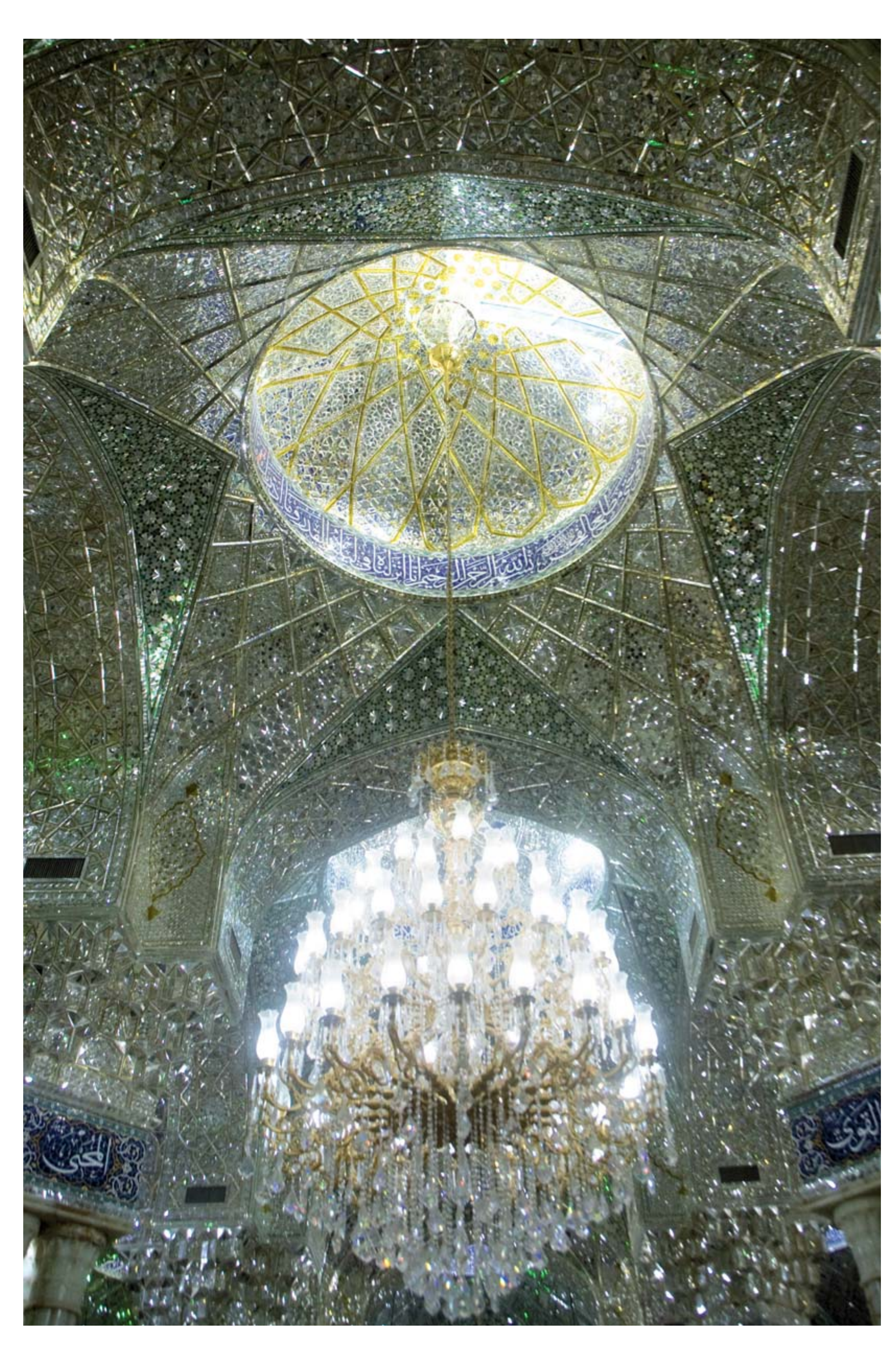
Karbala, Kazimiyya and Samarra. The uniformity of design is most likely due to the Safavid patronage of these shrines. The outer enclosure at the Najaf shrine measures 119 m on the east side, 118.5 m on the north, 120.5 m on the west and 97 m on the south. The inner wall of this enclosure is almost square, and measures approximately 77.75 m to the north and south, and 83 m east and west. It will be apparent that there is a significant space between the two walls, varying in width from approximately 9–9.75 m at the east and south; to 12.25 m at the north-west, and 26.5 m on the western and northern sides.

With the exception of its five monumental entrances, the exterior of the shrine has been rebuilt quite recently according to a rather uniform design. The wall is divided vertically by regularly spaced, slightly raised buttresses which enclose blind arches filled in with varieties of square Kufic panels. The shrine is entered from five monumental portals, with the three main ones located in the middle of the eastern, northern and southern sides. These are respectively the Main or Clock Portal, al-Tusi Portal and the Qibla Portal. There are two additional gates: the Portal of Muslim Ibn 'Aqil, a few metres north of the Clock Gate, and al-'Amara or al-Faraj Portal, near the south-western corner.

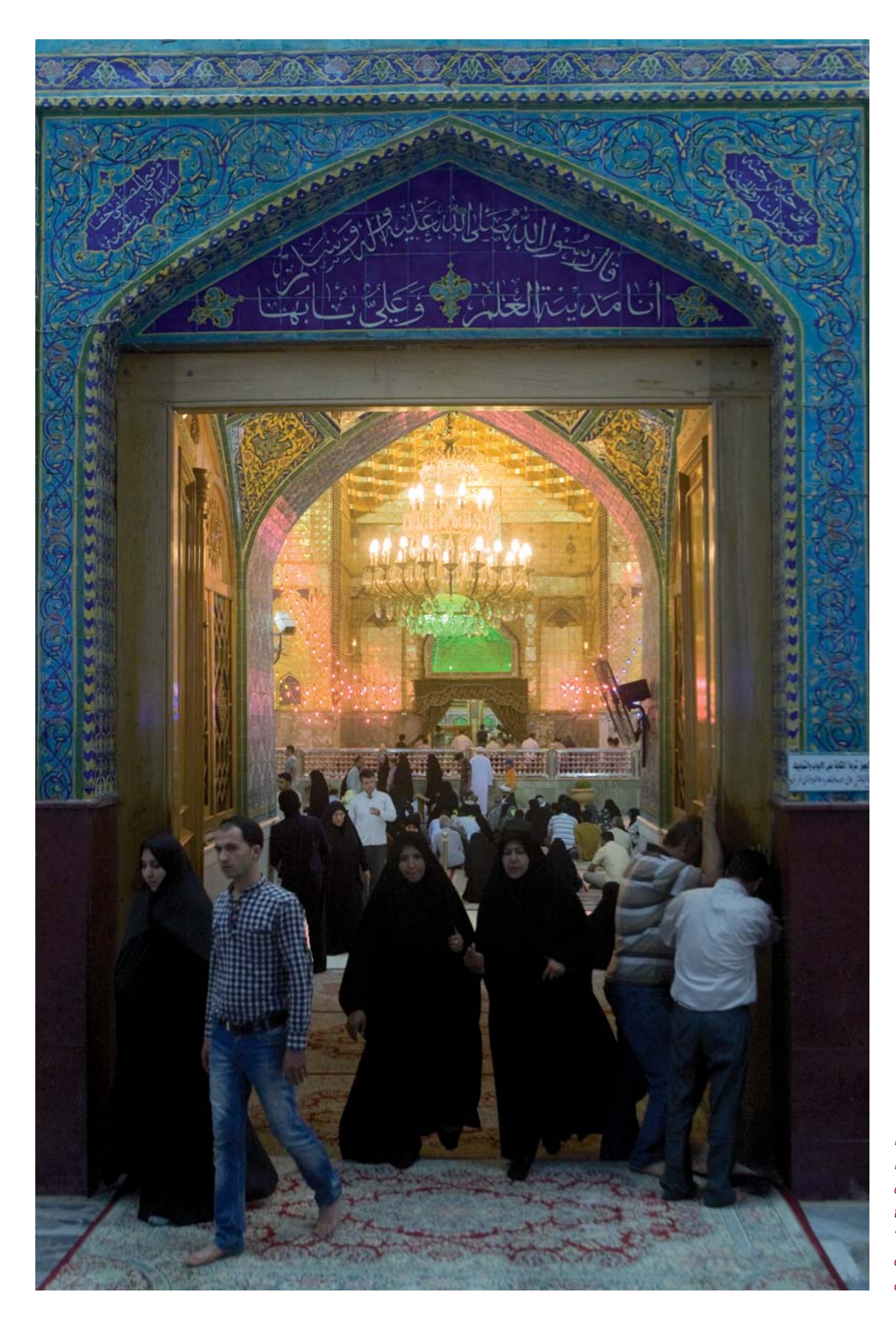
All these portals follow a more or less standard design format, both externally and internally. They consist of tall and rather deep *iwans* that provide the enclosure wall with monumental focal points and signs of welcome. Both sides of the portal, facing the street and facing the courtyard, form a single vaulted space, which is divided near the middle by an elaborate golden door, so the exterior *iwan* is reflected in the courtyard. Overall, these portals are quite densely decorated in polychrome tile mosaic, in the form of arabesque patterns and long calligraphic passages that stretch across the portal and surround the *iwan* in one or more long friezes.

The Clock Portal, which has been renamed after the Clock Tower above it, directly faces the opening of the Grand Bazaar and is generally considered the main portal of the shrine. Rising above the height of the enclosure wall, the Clock Portal is further emphasized by the tall Clock Tower and by the complexity of its design. A rectangular frame, topped by a long qur'anic inscription, encloses an *iwan* whose pointed arch is defined by a turquoise cable moulding, which in turn encloses an *iwan* with a *muqarnas* vault. Beneath this vault is an arched wooden window divided into three small windows decorated with geometric patterns. A smaller pointed arch, also topped by an inscription, frames the actual door, which is made, like all the other doors at the shrine, of massive teak sheathed in ornamented silver-gilt panels. The Muslim Ibn 'Aqil Portal, a few metres north of the Clock Portal, is much simpler in design and ornament.

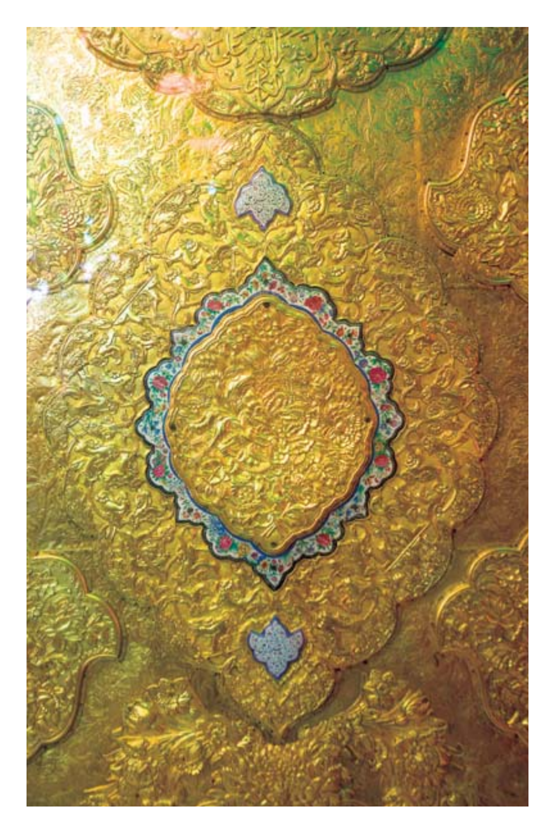
Al-Tusi Portal, named after Shaykh al-Tusi (d.459/1067), defines the northern enclosure wall. It is a little shorter than the Clock Portal but otherwise resembles it in most respects. The inscription above the entrance, however, is not qur'anic but rather a poem in praise of Imam 'Ali. The hallway leading to the courtyard, at 19 metres in length, is much deeper than that of all the other portals, long enough to be vaulted by two arches and a *muqarnas* dome. Al-Tusi Portal is symmetrically balanced in the middle of the southern side by the Qibla Portal, which is smaller but resembles the other portals in most respects. A poetic inscription to Shaykh Hasan Al Kashif al-Ghita' dates this portal to 1289/1872. Finally, Bab al-Faraj or al-'Amara is located near the south-western corner of the enclosure, at the west side of the enclosure wall, having once been linked with the 'Amara quarter. Smaller and simpler than the other portals, it is covered with many qur'anic and *hadith* inscriptions, and poems in praise of Imam 'Ali.



Play of light on the mirror mosaics. Al-Ra's Mosque at the western end of the shrine.



Door to the shrine. Note above an inscription with the famous saying 'I am the city of knowledge, and 'Ali is its door.'



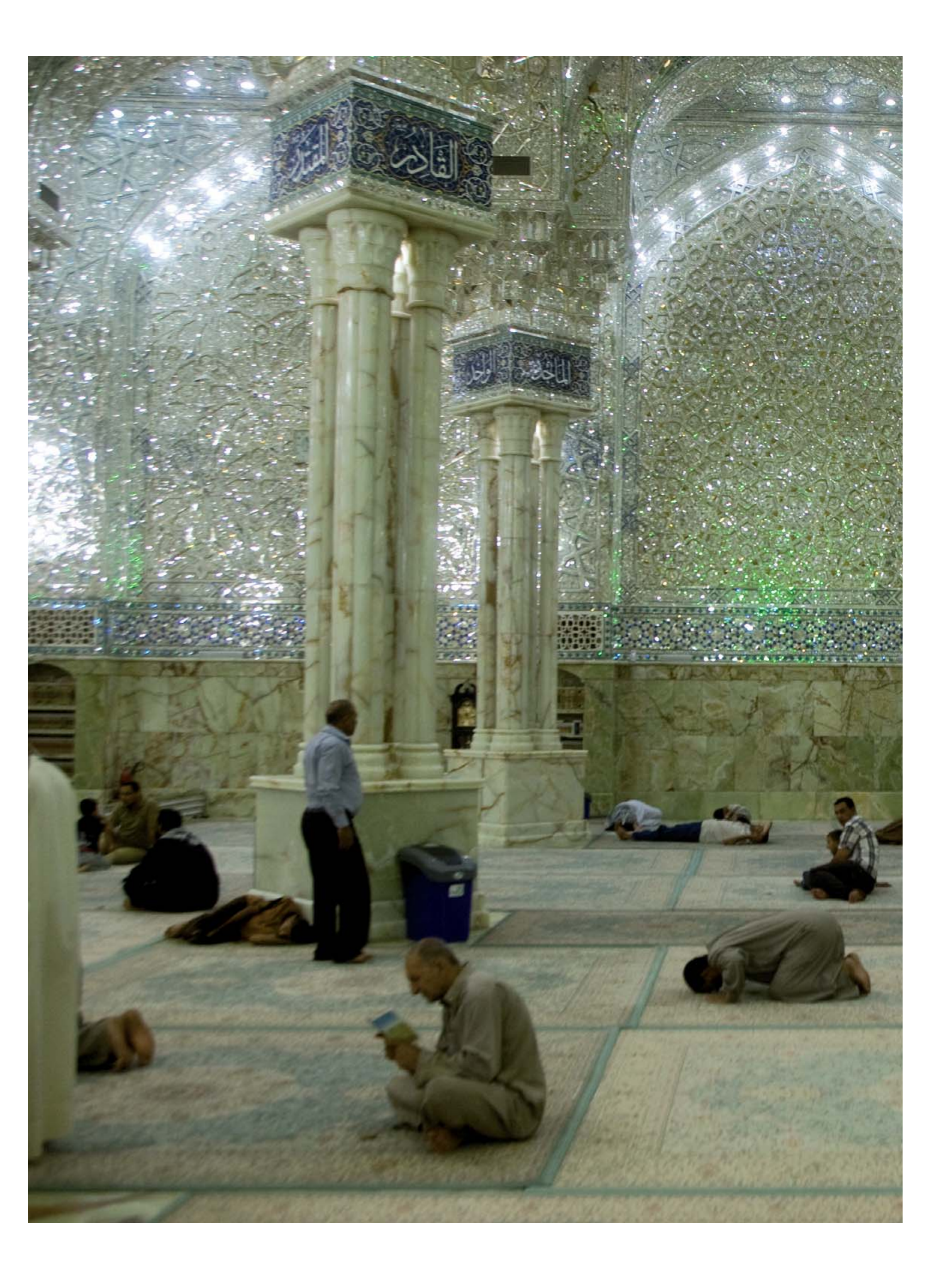
Detail of door. Gold, silver and enamel are used to cover and decorate all doors in the shrine.

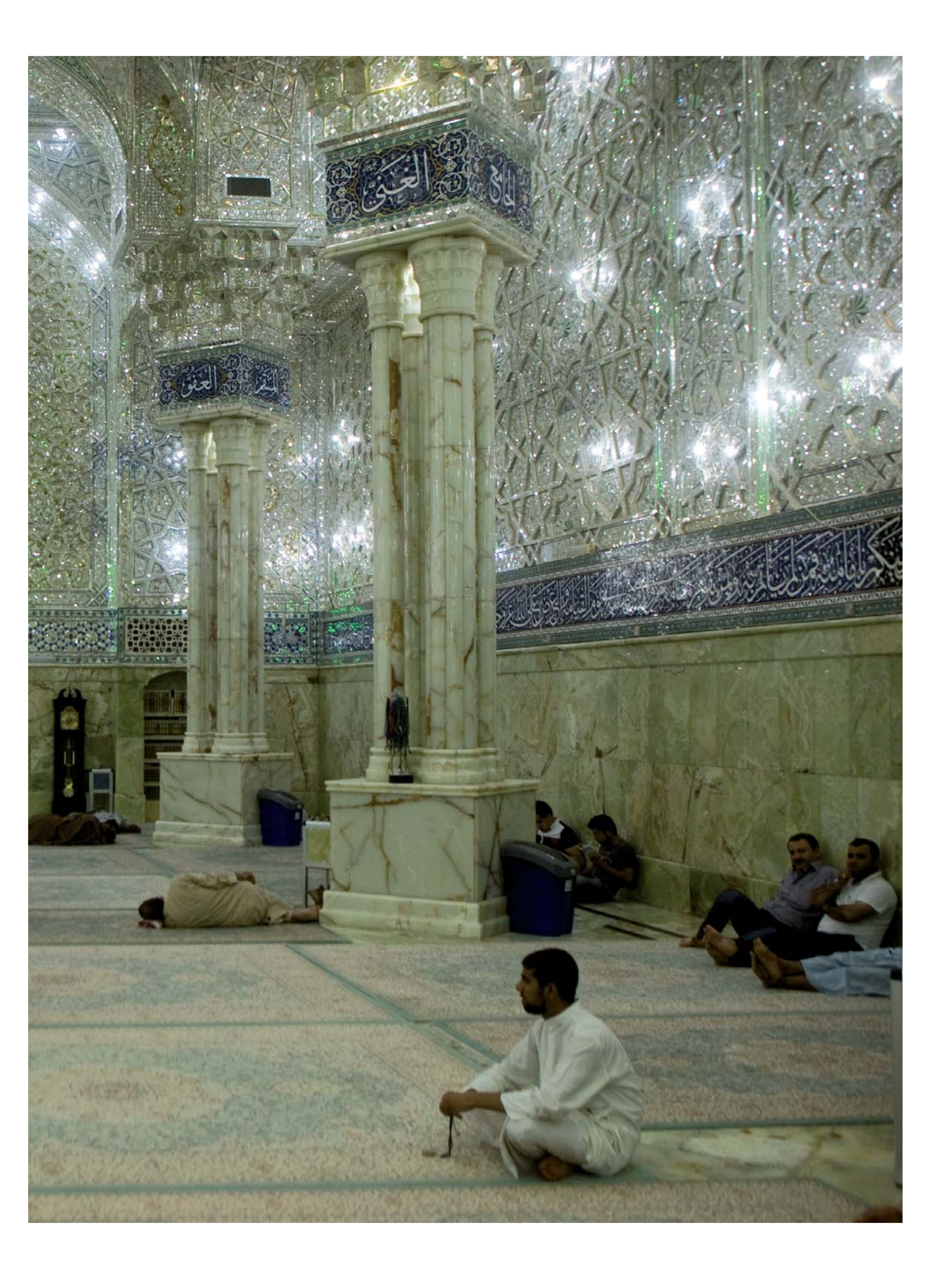
The courtyard surrounds the inner shrine on all sides and generally follows a modular design. The entrance *iwans* extend the full height of the wall and are flanked by two superimposed rows of smaller *iwans*, separated by a horizontal strip. There are thirteen small *iwans* on the north and east sides, fourteen on the east side and eight on the west side, four on each side of the inner shrine. These *iwans*, which are generally of uniform width, lead to small rooms that accommodate a variety of administrative, educational and religious functions. The same arrangement is followed on the upper floor.

The inner shrine stands in the middle of the courtyard, surrounded by it on three sides, but linked at the west to the Al-Ra's Mosque. Its forms are simple and well defined: a massive cube with chamfered edges, flanked by twin minarets and topped by a dome, all covered in gold. The main body is 43 m long and 21 m high; the minarets are 38 m tall, and the onion-shaped dome is 42 m to its peak. There is little doubt that this unit was designed – in plan, elevations and even ornament – according to exacting ratios and proportions, whose secrets have not yet been uncovered.

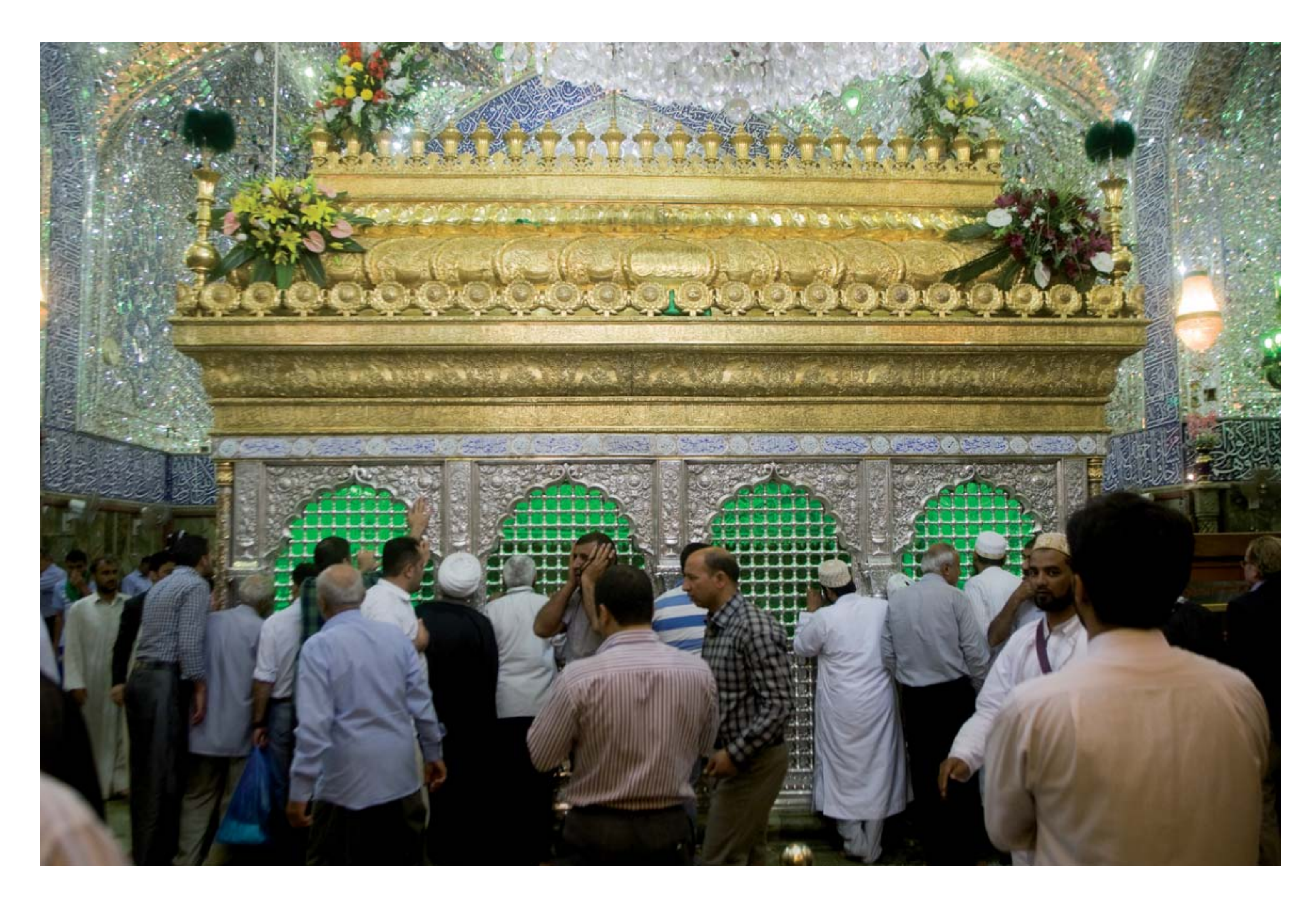
The inner shrine is accessed from the courtyard by eight entrances and from the adjacent Al-Ra's Mosque by five more entrances, making a total of thirteen. All the other entrances are easily dwarfed by the main entrance in the middle of the eastern façade, which is the tallest, widest and most lavishly ornamented part of the shrine. The façade is composed, much like the main portals, as a huge *iwan*, 14 m high, framed with rectangular panels and crowned by wide projecting eaves. The pointed arch of the *iwan* is framed by a cable moulding and vaulted by a golden *muqarnas* vault of extraordinary size, design and luxury. Four layers of *muqarnas* cells build up from the two corners, connect at the fifth layer, continue for three more layers, and converge onto a small half dome at the top. Just below the vault is a rectangular panel that frames a pointed arch which contains an exquisite vase with naturalistic flowers in gold relief work over blue enamel: carnations, peonies and tulips. The Golden Iwan is perhaps the most iconic image of the shrine.

The Golden Iwan is symmetrically extended to both sides and flanked by two golden minarets. As with much of the inner shrine, these minarets were very likely first built by the Safavids in the early eleventh/seventeenth century and covered in gold during Nadir Shah's reign in 1742–3 CE. Rising 38 m from ground level, these cylindrical minarets are ringed near the top with a broad band of golden calligraphy on blue enamel. Above this band the minarets support a balcony with twelve windows, beyond which the minaret continues for another 4 m to a little lobed golden dome. Framed by the twin minarets is a bulbous double-shell golden dome that soars above them by about 5 m. Its drum is pierced by twelve windows, above which there is a wide calligraphic frieze, consisting of a central band of qur'anic verses, flanked above and below by Persian translations. Like the minaret, these inscriptions are in gold on a lapis-blue enamel background.


القادر
الماجد
الواحد



الغني
العفو



Two entrances lead to the cenotaph of Imam ʿAli, one for women and another for men. Pilgrims touch the cenotaph to connect with ʿAli.

Grandiose mirror mosaics at the shrine of Al-Ra's Mosque.

All thirteen entrances from the courtyard and from Al-Ra's Mosque lead to a corridor, between 5 and 7.5 m wide, which surrounds the inner domed square containing the cenotaph of Imam 'Ali. It forms a kind of buffer zone between the inner sanctuary (*hadra*) and the courtyard. All surfaces in this corridor are covered in mosaic mirror work, *'aineh-kari*, a Persian decorative technique found in this and all other Shi'i shrines in Iraq, Iran and Syria. The *hadra* is accessed from the corridor through three doors, the main eastern door and two secondary northern and southern doors. A fourth door on the western side has been blocked off with silver grid bars. All doors, especially the eastern one, are sheathed in silver and densely ornamented in golden floral and calligraphic motifs over enamel.

The tomb chamber surrounding the cenotaph is in the form of a cross-in-square, a design type that has been used in Persian architecture for many centuries, and an indication of the Safavid foundation of the shrine. Eight arches – four rising above the *iwans* and four rising from the corners – intersect to form a *muqarnas* zone on which rests the tall drum of the dome. The drum has twelve windows that reflect the exterior ones, a number which might be related to the twelve imams. The dome is 13 m in diameter and 23.5 m high, since it is the inner shell of a much taller double-shell dome. The arches and the *muqarnas* zone are decorated in mirror mosaic work, which indicates a restoration of the thirteenth/nineteenth century, whereas the surface of the dome itself is decorated in minute tile work, suggesting an earlier period of decoration. A broad band of inscriptions encircles the drum just below the windows. They include qur'anic passages, prayers to the twelve imams and a poem in praise of Imam 'Ali. A huge chandelier illuminates the interior.

The centre of the tomb chamber is occupied by a large cubic cenotaph – referred to locally as *shubbak* – another feature that is found in all Shi'i shrines in Iraq, Iran and Syria. Installed in 1942 CE, the *shubbak* is 4 m high, 6.35 m long and 5.10 m wide, and is made mainly of silver and gold. It consists of two parts: a rectangular box with seventeen grilled windows and a door, and a golden crowning element above it. Interspersed between the windows are thin columns that support the structure. These columns and all other elements in the box are densely covered in relief floral motifs, inlaid with gold, diamonds and rubies. The crown consists of six superimposed golden layers, which include qur'anic inscriptions, floral motifs, *hadith* selections in honour of Imam 'Ali, and the ninety-nine attributes of God. Inside the *shubbak* is a rectangular box made of Indian teak, inlaid with ivory, mother of pearl and other types of coloured wood. All four sides of the box are covered with inscriptions from the Qur'an and various prayers, while the western side also bears an inscription with the date (1360/1942) and the donor's name, Abu Muhammad Tahir Sayf al-Din from India (*min bilad al-hind*).



Great Mosque of Kufa, with the old mosque in the background, and the new courtyard surrounding the domes of Muslim Ibn 'Aqil and Mukhtar al-Thaqafi in the foreground.

The religious monuments in Kufa

To cover all the mosques, shrines and *madrasas* in the Najaf–Kufa region in any detail would far exceed the limitations of this book. Here we can only discuss the Great Mosque of Kufa, the house of Imam 'Ali and the al-Sahla Mosque, and touch very briefly on the other religious structures.

The Great Mosque of Kufa

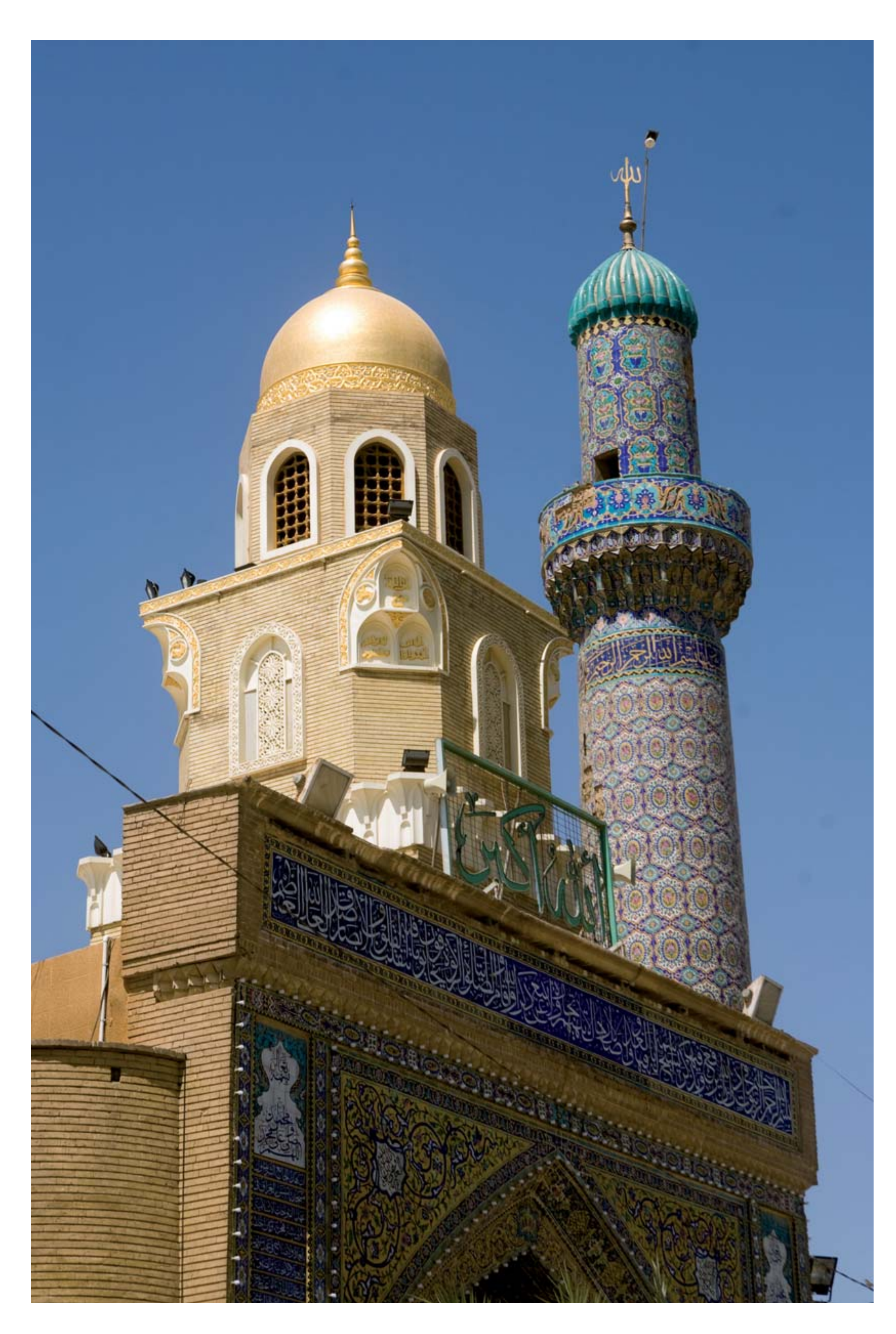
As was explained earlier, the Great Mosque of Kufa and the Dar al-Imara (Government Palace) constitute the core of the garrison town (*misr*) that the early Muslim conquerors founded in 15/636. Archaeologically speaking, both the mosque and the Dar al-Imara date back to the first/



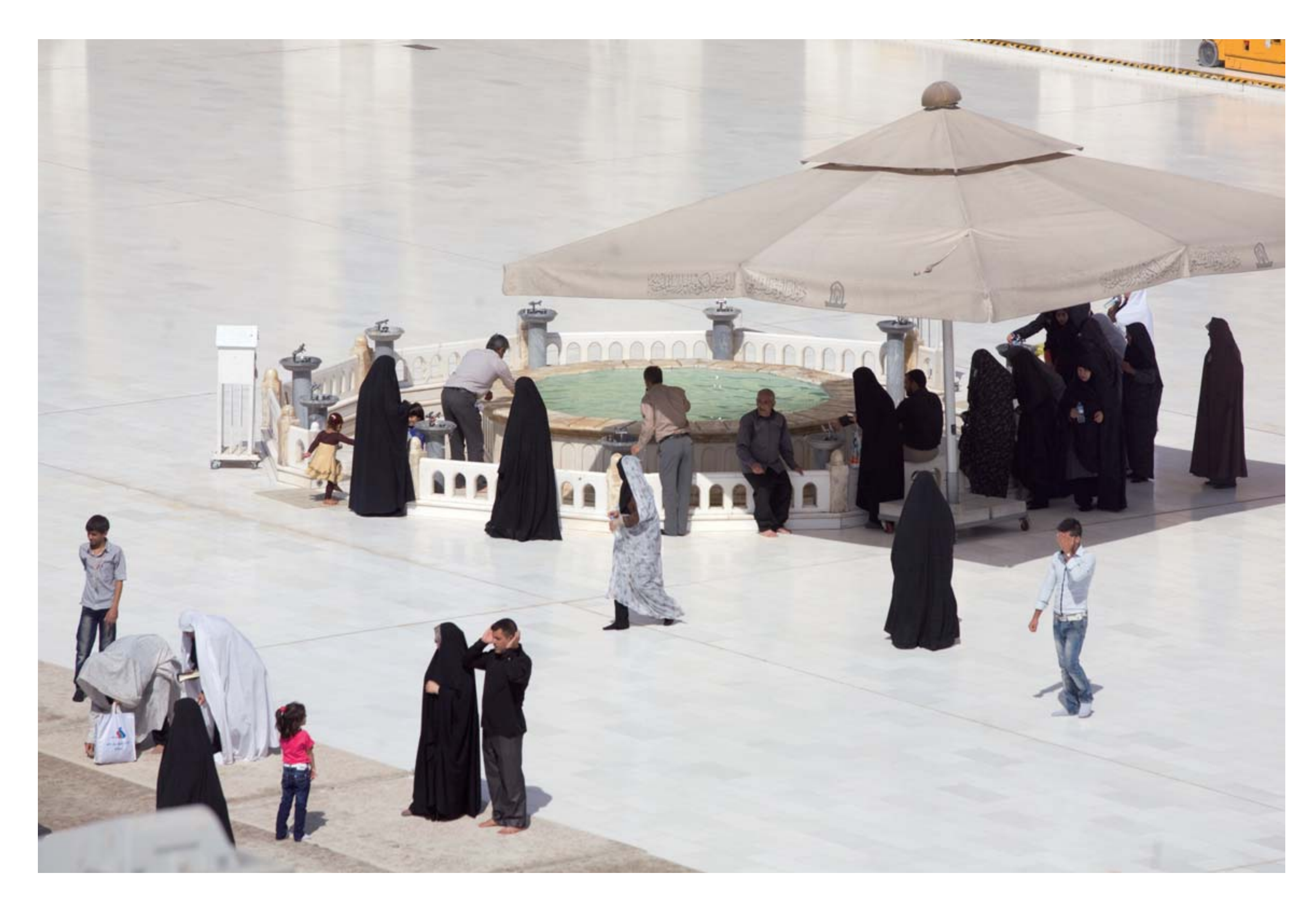
seventh century (to 50/670 specifically), when they were rebuilt in more permanent materials, using columns from the site of Hira. The Dar al-Imara ceased its official functions in the Abbasid period, and today appears, several metres below the mosque, as a vast field of walls less than a metre high. It tends to be completely ignored by visitors to Kufa, as it contains nothing of religious value for them.

The Great Mosque in contrast has undergone numerous periods of restoration and expansion which have converted it from a rather normal early Islamic congregational mosque to a mosque that is now the site of several shrines and other commemorative structures and plaques. The exact chronology of this transformation is not known, and is unlikely ever to be known, since the Great Mosque was completely rebuilt in 2006–08 CE, and records of its earlier phases are lacking. It seems likely, however, that the onion-shaped golden dome that shelters the tombs of Muslim Ibn ʻAqil and al-Mukhtar al-Thaqafi, and the green dome above the tomb of Hani Ibn ʻArwa, once stood outside the perimeter of the original mosque. They might have been first built some time in the Safavid period.

In its current condition, the Great Mosque of Kufa retains a few aspects from the original Umayyad mosque – the exterior semi-circular towers, the original plan, the courtyard, and the columns supporting a flat wooden roof, although most of the old columns have been replaced by new ones. The rebuild, from its foundations to the peak of its minaret, was under the sponsorship of the Bohra Ismaʻilis from Mumbai. The mosque was also considerably expanded to the west by the addition of a vast courtyard to enclose the domes of Muslim Ibn ʻAqil and Hani Ibn ʻArwa. This courtyard will be entered through a tile-encrusted monumental *iwan* with twin minarets which is currently under construction.

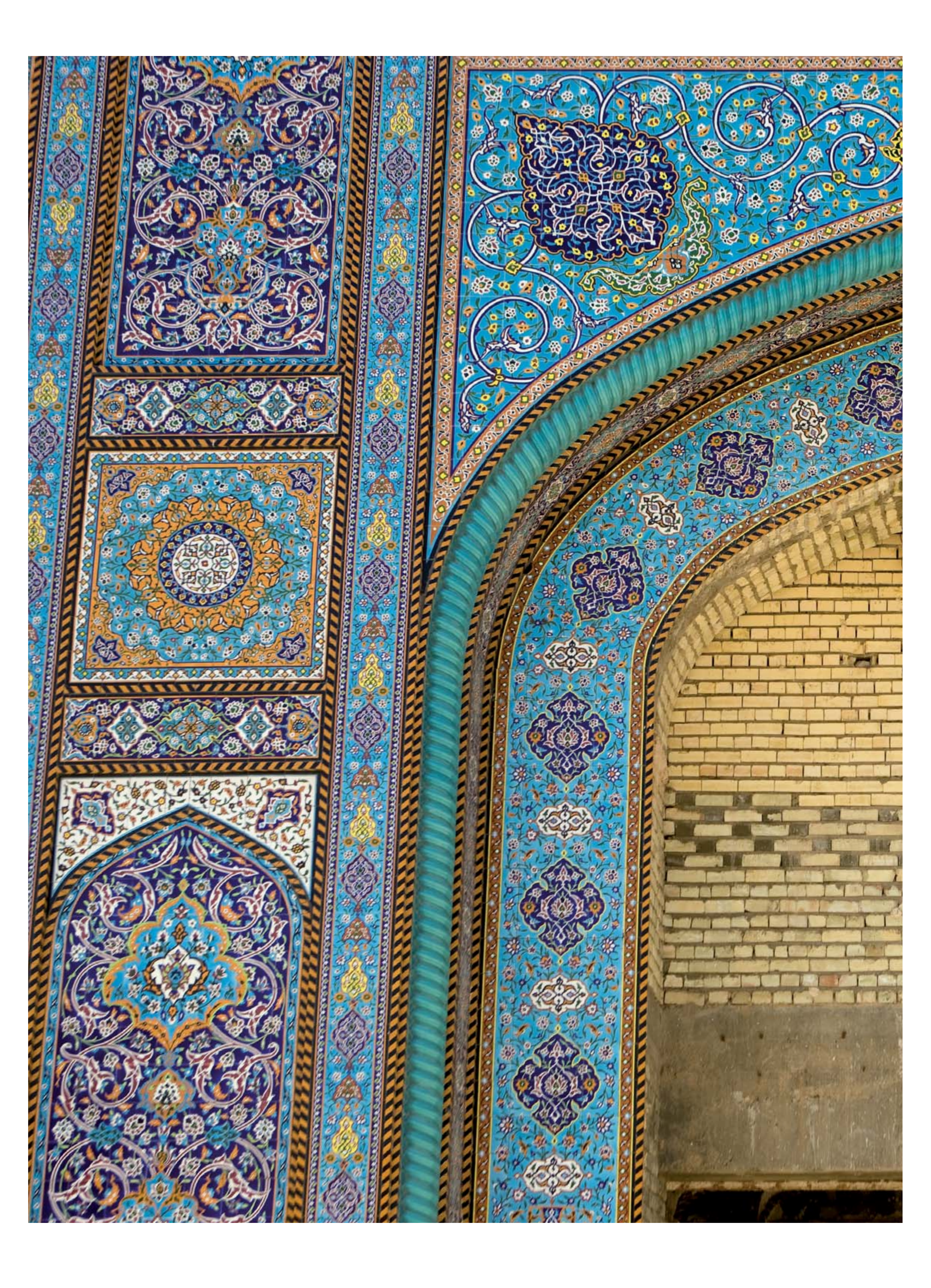


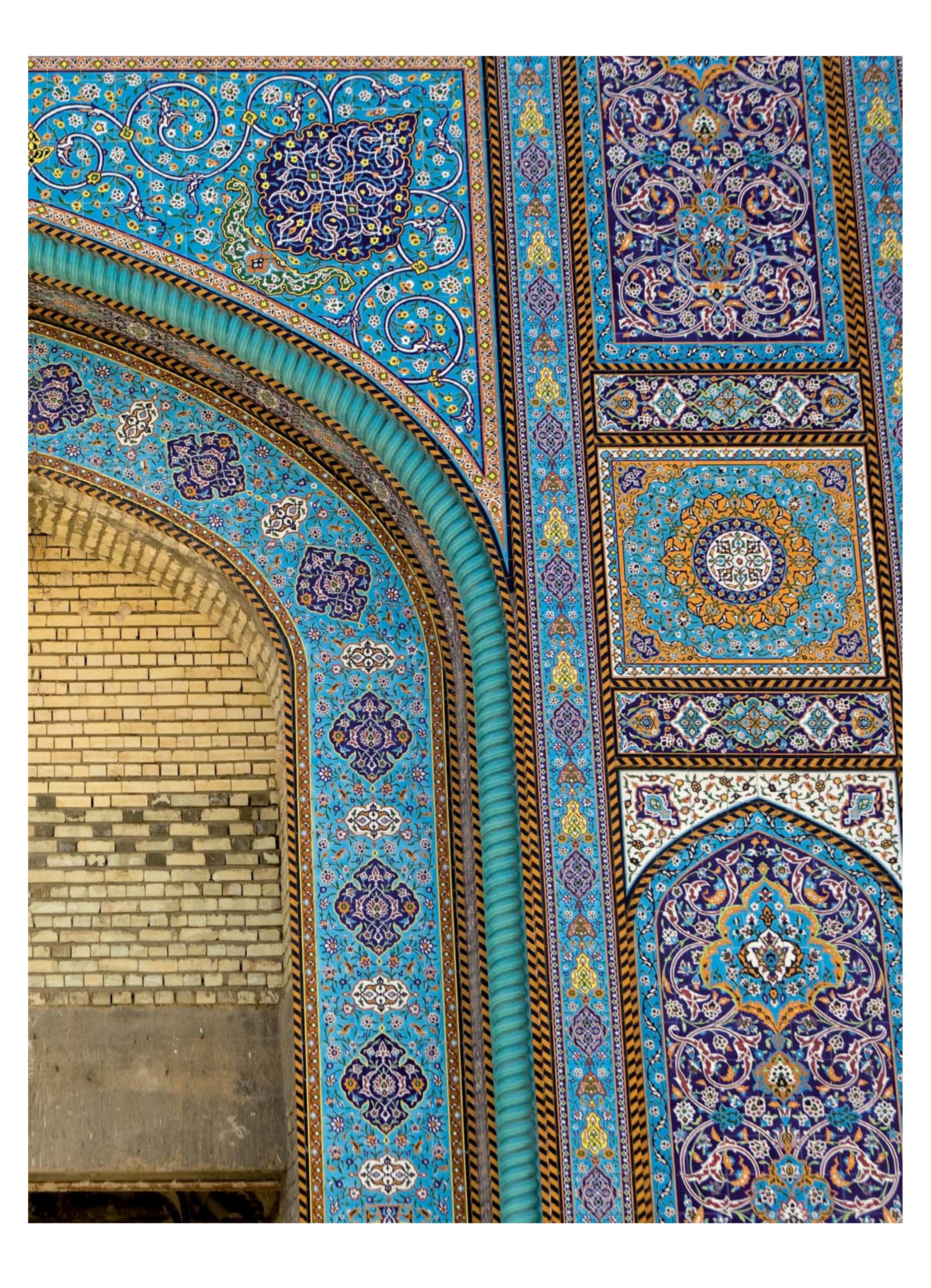
Great Mosque of Kufa, with two modern minarets. One draws on Iranian architecture and the other on early Arab architecture.



Ablution fountain at the Great Mosque of Kufa. According to Shi'i belief, Noah's Ark was moored after the Flood in this very spot.

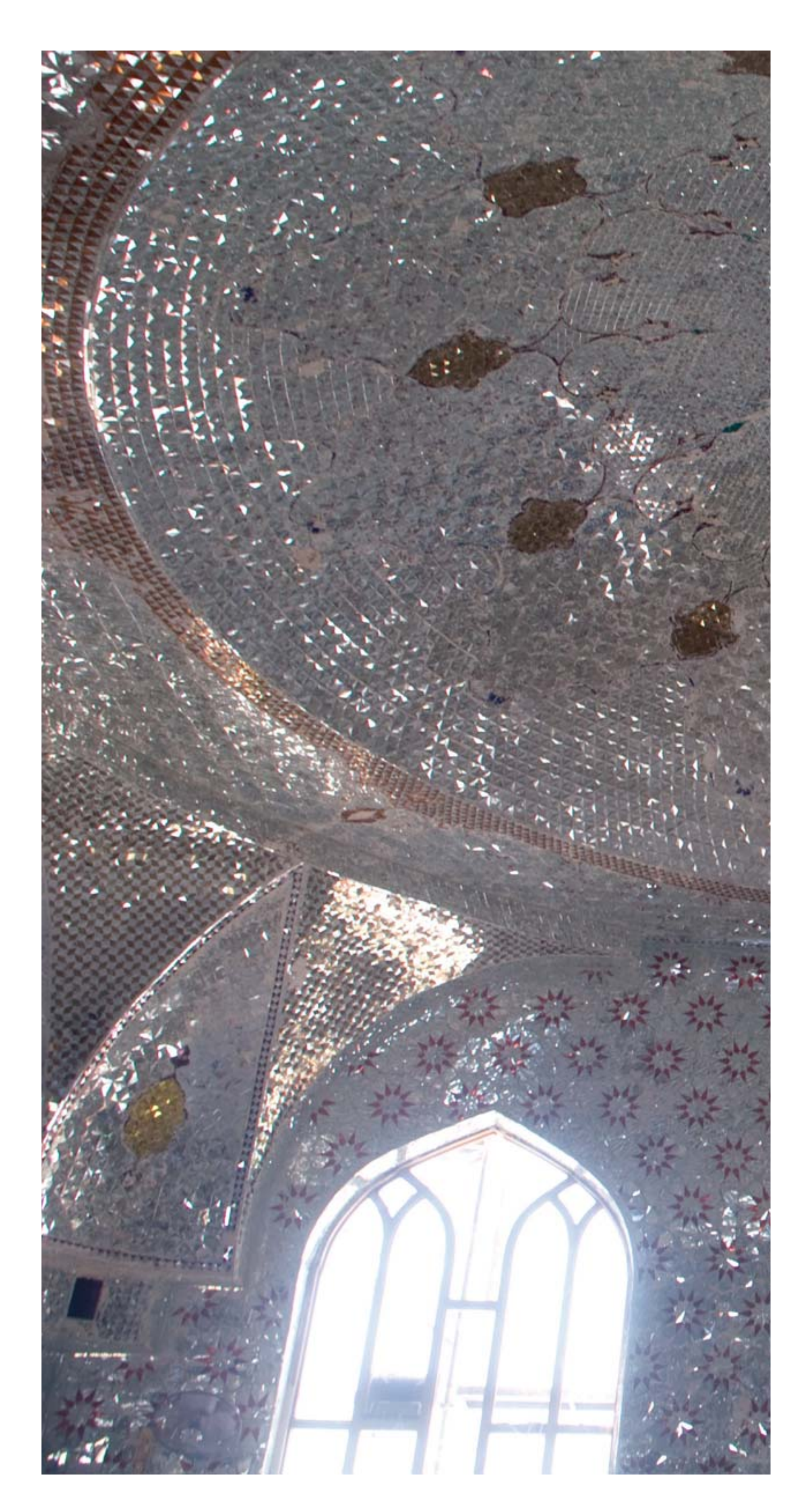
Curiously, the design principles and stylistic features used in rebuilding the mosque are neither regional nor Indian, but derive largely from Iranian and especially Fatimid Egyptian architecture, an interesting reference to the Isma'ili Fatimid state that ruled Egypt and parts of Syria (from 358/969 to 565/1170). This is immediately clear from the main portals to the shrine, in particular the eastern Bab al-Hujja, which is basically a modern blending of various features from fifth/eleventh and sixth/twelfth-century architecture from Cairo. The inscriptions are in a floriated Kufic calligraphic style. Bab al-Thu'ban (Snake Portal) is a fairly typical Iranian *iwan* portal, but with a wooden door in Fatimid style. A third portal, Bab al-Ashtar, which connects the mosque to the new courtyard, is in a specifically late Iraqi style, with an unglazed brick *iwan* covered by a *muqarnas* vault. This portal is surmounted by a clock tower which dates to 1969 CE.





◤ *Detail of* iwan *from the annex to the Great Mosque of Kufa's courtyard.*

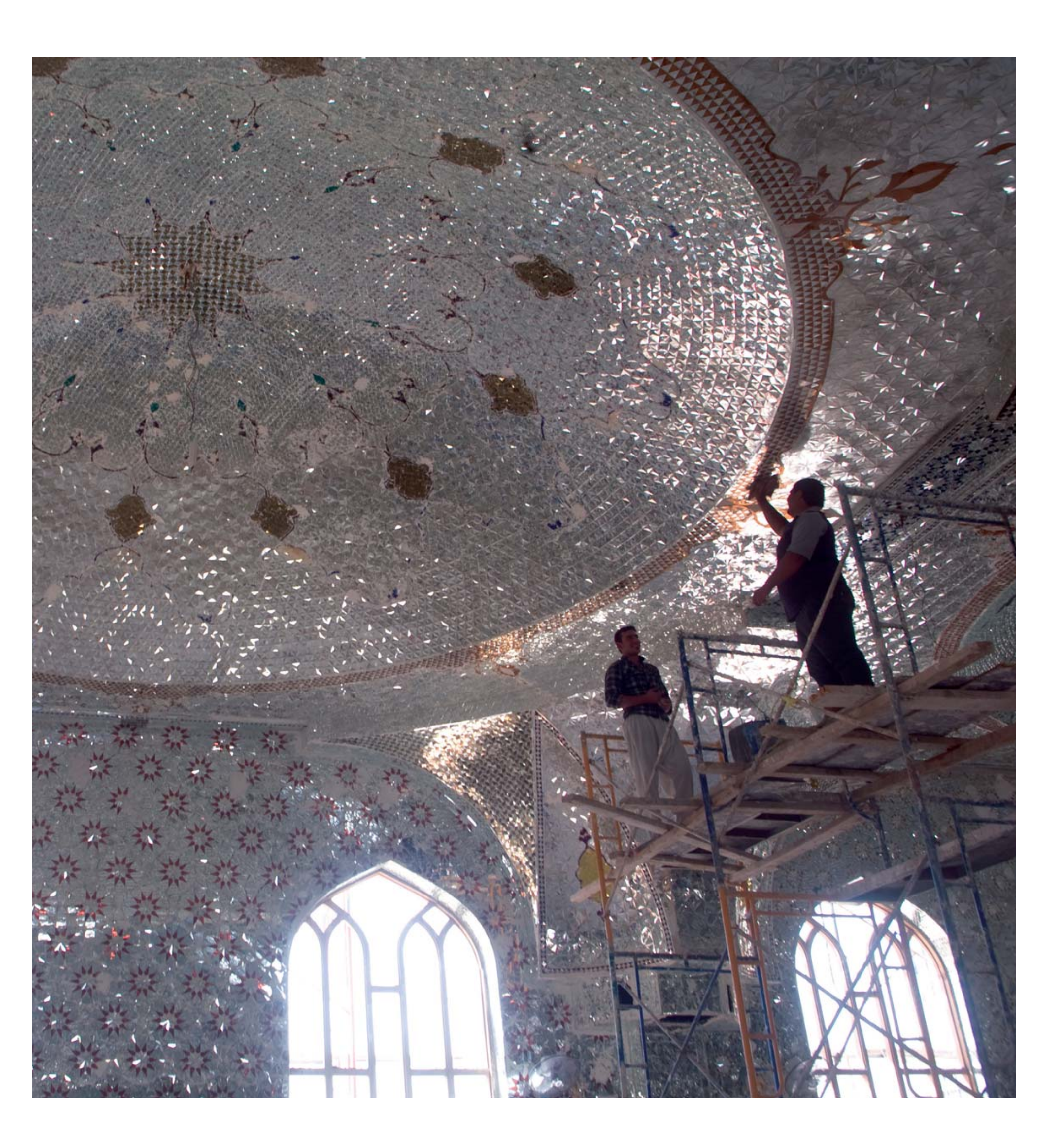
Applying mirror mosaic to the vault of the dome in the Great Mosque of Kufa.



The courtyard has been rebuilt in a style that refers to the original form, a continuous portico of pointed arches raised on brick piers, but blended with various Fatimid features, such as roundels with the word 'Allah' in them and a continuous frieze of floriated Kufic above them. The flat wooden roof behind this portico is supported by large modern marble columns, one aisle deep on three sides and four aisles deep in the spacious prayer hall. At the north-western and north-eastern corners of the courtyard rise two massive modern minarets, built in the early Islamic style of Qayrawan, as towers with three zones topped with a golden dome.

But for most pilgrims the significance of the Great Mosque of Kufa far exceeds its archaeology and history, for its sacred history, according to Islamic sources, refers to it as 'a temple for angels', a temple for Adam and the ancient prophets, and a mosque that the Prophet Muhammad mentioned during his Night Journey (*al-Isra' wal-Mi'raj*). The mosque is filled with the memories, sites and shrines of ancient patriarchs, the Prophet Muhammad, Imam 'Ali and other members of Ahl al-Bayt. Possibly the most significant of these sites is the *mihrab* near which Imam 'Ali was praying when he was assassinated. It has been rebuilt as a massive *mihrab* that extends the full height of the wall, in a thoroughly Fatimid style, but made out of silver and gold relief work. It is a modern masterpiece of Islamic art.

At various points in the courtyard and inside the prayer hall are sacred spots – made into low *mihrabs* or with information carved into the columns – that mark the miraculous presence (*maqam*) of a number of prophets and members of Ahl al-Bayt: Adam, Noah, the archangel Gabriel, the Prophet Muhammad, Imam Zayn al-'Abidin and Ja'far al-Tayyar. Under each of these markers is an advisory note to the pilgrims regarding the number of prayers they should offer up. Groups of pilgrims, usually led by a guide, move from one sacred spot to the next, offering their prayers and seeking intercession.





Next to the *mihrab* of Imam ʻAli in sanctity is the double shrine of Muslim Ibn ʻAqil and Mukhtar al-Thaqafi, sheltered by a bulbous golden dome. A splendid entrance at the south-western corner of the courtyard, inscribed ʻPeace be upon you Muslim Ibn ʻAqilʼ, leads to a rectangular chamber with the cenotaphs (*shubbak*) of the two saints, of which the larger belongs to Muslim Ibn ʻAqil, the martyred cousin of Imam al-Husayn. Both cenotaphs are constructed and decorated in the same manner as the cenotaph of Imam ʻAli, but on a smaller scale, with a box with window grilles in silver topped by a golden crown. All the walls above about 1.20 m from the floor are covered in mirror mosaics (*ʻaineh kari*), which continue all the way to the apex of the dome, producing a hypnotic effect. An inscription on the wall dates this work to 1431/2008–09. Across the courtyard is the green dome of Hani Ibn ʻArwa, whose interior resembles that of Muslim Ibn ʻAqil in most respects, but at a somewhat more modest scale.

The house of Imam ʻAli

Although we know that Imam ʻAli resided in Kufa during his caliphate (656–661 CE) and that he rejected living in Dar al-Imara for a modest residence located somewhere near the Great Mosque, the exact location of his house is a matter of conjecture. However a small mud house has been attributed to him. In recent years it has been considerably enlarged into a fairly substantial yellow brick structure with a monumental entrance, a large turquoise-tiled dome, and a calligraphic frieze in white over dark blue that wraps around the entire building. The entrance comprises a tall rectangular frame that encloses a shallow *iwan* with a single entrance that is draped with a green curtain. Qurʼanic inscriptions surround the rectangular frame, the arch of the *iwan* and the panel within it, while the names of God, Muhammad, Fatima and the twelve imams are inscribed within floral forms linked to each other by a continuous branch.

The magnificent mirror ornamentation is a symbol of the imams' inner light.

The plan of the house is based on the ancient house plans of Kufa and Hira, except that the main courtyard is covered by a dome. You enter from a modest front hall into a series of labyrinthine corridors that lead to various vaulted spaces which do not allow for the extensive circulation of visitors. Among these spaces are the private rooms of al-Hasan and al-Husayn; a room where the corpse of Imam ʻAli was washed before burial; and a well of fresh water, which is thought by pilgrims to be a source of blessing. The exterior turquoise dome shelters a rather plain cenotaph, which surrounds the slab on which the body of Imam ʻAli was prepared for burial.

The al-Sahla Mosque

The al-Sahla Mosque is located at the north-western edge of old Kufa, at a location that used to be a cemetery before it was converted into a mosque in which the first followers of ʻAli (*Shiʻat ʻAli*) prayed and congregated in the early Islamic period. Its historical phases are nearly impossible to disentangle, not least because it was substantially rebuilt in the late fourteenth/twentieth century, and again more thoroughly in the past few years, when a *khan* called Khan a-Zuwwar was incorporated into its structure. In its present condition the al-Sahla Mosque is a spacious irregular rectangular structure entered through a modern tiled portal on its western side. Its exterior is marked by a single minaret, which was rebuilt, according to a dated inscription, in 1967 CE. But, for most visitors, the sacred history of the al-Sahla Mosque has little to do with documents and dates, for it stretches in time to include all of Islamic and pre-Islamic history, from ancient times to the present. All these events are marked by sacred places for Abraham, Idris, Ehud, Saleh and al-Khidr, all of whom prayed or in some cases resided in the enclosure of the current mosque. In addition the mosque is marked by small shrines for various imams, including ʻAli Zayn al-ʻAbidin, Jaʻfar al-Sadiq and ʻAli al-Hadi. More than anything, the al-Sahla Mosque is believed to be the place where the Awaited Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, will reappear on the Day of Judgement. His shrine and that of Jaʻfar al-Sadiq occupy the middle of the mosque.

Other shrines and mosques

There are numerous other shrines and commemorative mosques in and around Najaf, many of which are located on the roads leading to Wadi al-Salam cemetery and to Kufa. The al-Hanana Mosque (Mosque of Compassion) marks the spot where a grove of palm trees are believed to have bowed down in sorrow as Imam ʻAli's funeral procession from Kufa to Najaf passed by. This mosque is also said to contain some of the skin of Imam al-Husayn, which had allegedly been ripped off his body by his enemies. Another important shrine on this road is that of Kumayl Ibn Ziyad, one of Imam ʻAli's closest allies, who was killed by the notorious Umayyad governor al-Hajjaj. This shrine also contains the remains of the famous scholar and lecturer Shaykh Ahmad al-Waʻili (d. 2003 CE), which increases the number of visitors to the complex. A third important shrine is that of Zayd Ibn ʻAli, brother of the fifth imam, Muhammad al-Baqir, and uncle of the sixth imam, Jaʻfar al-Sadiq, and a great religious authority himself. As with most shrines in this area, the shrine of Zayd Ibn ʻAli was rebuilt at a grand scale in recent years and is now the destination of numerous visitors. Finally, mention must be made of the shrine of Maytham al-Tammar, the freed slave of Imam ʻAli and a redoubtable supporter of the first imam and his sons al-Hasan and al-Husayn. More shrines in Wadi al-Salam cemetery are discussed in Chapter 6.

The patronage and overall significance of Shi'i religious sites

Before we conclude this chapter on the religious structures in Najaf and Kufa, some mention seems warranted of the economic forces and sources that contributed to their creation, and the overall significance of their visible extravagance. Simply speaking, who paid for the building and maintains the shrines discussed, and what is the source of these funds?

In principle (as was mentioned earlier), all funds for the building and rebuilding of these shrines and mosques have come, not from the *zakat* (Muslim alms) or *khums* (the tithe Shi'i Muslims are expected to pay, estimated as one-fifth of their yearly profit) of ordinary worshippers, but from rich private individuals. Historically, these private donors tended to be caliphs, sultans, princes and other sovereigns who donated money or revenue from properties as *waqf* (endowment) for religious or charitable purposes.

More recently these funds have been donated not just by wealthy individuals but also by private corporations and religious societies. These might provide either capital funding for a specific project or a *waqf* to be disbursed in perpetuity for maintaining the shrine or for any of its related functions. Specific contributions – in particular the silver and gold doors and the *shubbaks* – are sometimes made entirely in their place of origin – which might for example be Shiraz, Isfahan or Karachi – and brought whole or in parts to be installed in the shrine. A quick non-scientific survey of these various contributions suggests that most have come from Iran, followed by the Ottoman Empire, Iraq and India. Although most of the patrons to the shrine of Imam 'Ali have been Imami Shi'a, Sunni patrons, and in particular the Ottoman sultans, have also made significant contributions. Bohra Isma'ilis, who share with the Imami Shi'ia their veneration of 'Ali and Ahl al-Bayt, were responsible for the entire rebuilding of the Great Mosque of Kufa.[17]

A final question about the shrines and mosques of Najaf and Kufa concerns the meaning or significance of their architecture and ornament. Without going into specific art historical details, the average reader might wish to know whether there is any significance behind the adoption of ostentatious and increasingly uniform architectural and ornamental forms in the mosques and shrines of Najaf, particularly those rebuilt in recent times. Is this standardized ostentation simply a reflection of Iranian architecture, or the need to project a 'transnational' image that minimizes local affiliation and appeals to all pilgrims, as one important scholar recently suggested?[18]

While the Iranian and transnational motives behind the recent architectural changes cannot be dismissed, could we read other specifically religious intentions or meanings into these architectural forms? Two examples will perhaps suffice to illustrate the possibility of such meanings. First, it seems likely that the broad spaces that enclose both the cenotaph (*shubbak*) and the inner section of the shrine of Imam 'Ali were created to facilitate visitation and circulation around the central shrine. This is a different arrangement from the more directional orientation of a mosque. Second, perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the ornament is its reflection and radiance, seen in glistening tiles, shiny gold and silver, and luminescent mirror work. In addition to creating a pervasive sense of luxury which befits the presence of the imams, the luminescence and inner glow of the ornamental forms, in particular mirror mosaic, most likely refer to the eternal light (*nur*) of which all imams are possessed. In other words, the costly and excessive ornament in Shi'i shrines might not simply be decorative but could also have an allegorical dimension that refers to the most immanent quality of the imams, their eternal and uncreated light.

The ring-selling sayyid

Not far from the shrine of Imam 'Ali a turbaned sayyid *is selling rings in his shop. He is studying at an advanced level at the* hawza *after having himself taught religious sciences there, but at the moment he is also dedicating a large part of his time to business. His fingers are covered with silver rings which he shows off to passers-by. Only one of the rings belongs to him – the one with the turquoise stone on the little finger of his right hand.*

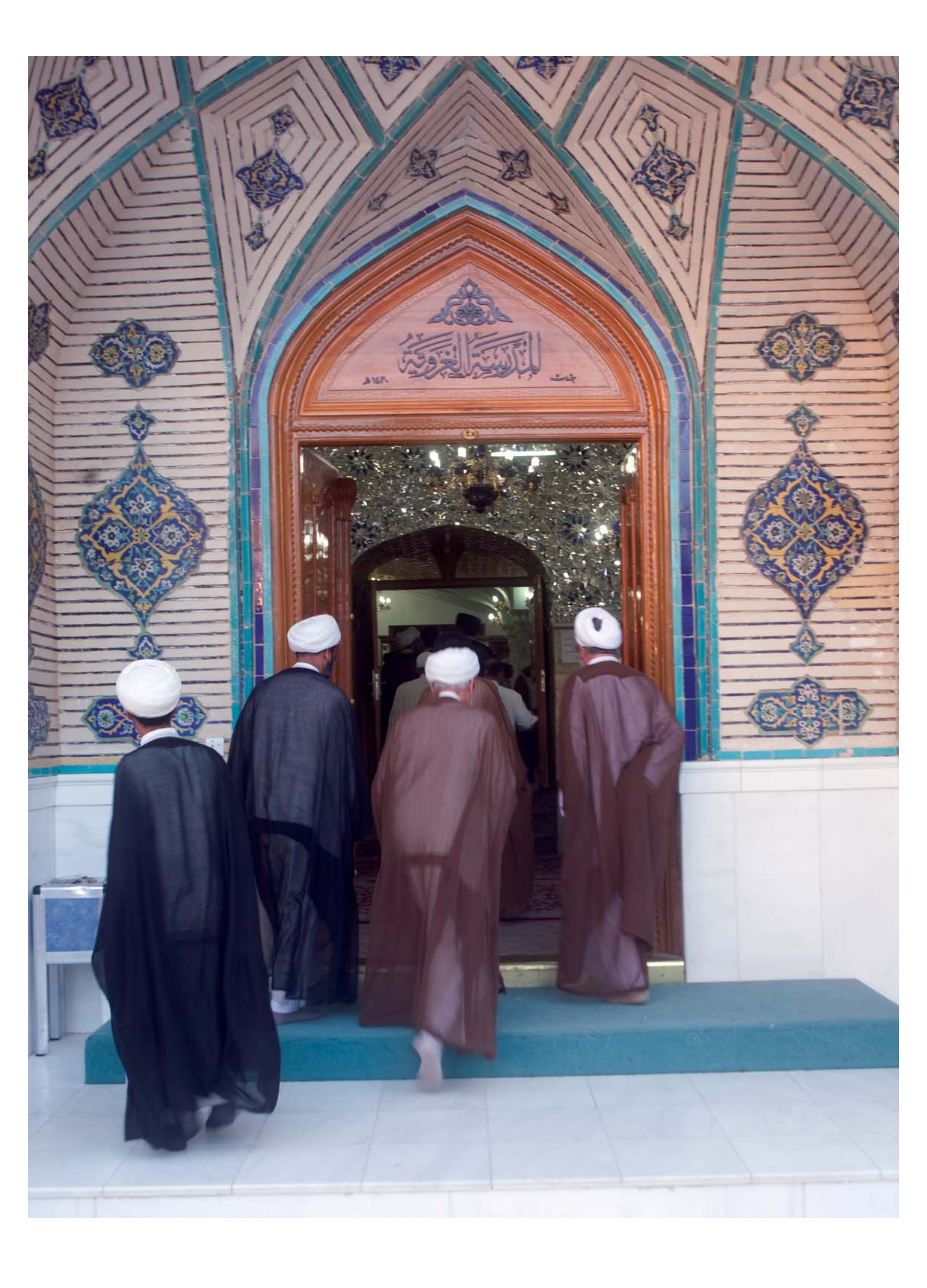
Why this ring? The sayyid *takes a book down from a nearby shelf, opens it at the page on turquoise, and begins to read out the stone's many qualities. Every stone has its own particular virtues, and all must be taken care of. Never expose the stones to the sun or high temperatures, never use grease or chemicals to clean them, and always take the rings off when washing your hands.*

The rings are very popular with pilgrims because various Shi'i traditions recommend that male believers wear a silver ring set with precious stones like rubies or sapphires on the little finger of the right hand. It is also possible to wear several such rings, along with others that are set with more affordable, but still very much sought-after, stones like agates. The rings have a spiritual value and are almost ritual objects. They are markers of Shi'i identity.

'I've got some wonderful things to show you,' the sayyid *says, producing first one small bag from the pockets of his robe, then another and another. Out of these he takes rings set with extraordinary cornelian or onyx stones, which are engraved with natural forms in different shades or colours. On one of them it is possible to make out a silhouette design representing one of the sacred figures of Shi'i Islam. On another you might guess at an image of the Ka'aba in Mecca, or of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Others are inscribed with words for those able to read them – 'here is 'Ali, here is al-Husayn, and here is Muhammad'.*



Only the turquoise ring belongs to the sayyid. *All other are for sale.*


المدرسة الغروية
جددت
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The gate of knowledge

The entrance of the Al-Gharawiyya School, in the sanctuary.

A student in his room at the Al-Shubbariyya School.

Najaf is a place of enchantment and religiosity. In the area around the shrine of Imam 'Ali, there is a mixture of bustling movement and pious calm which brings together noise and silence, and unites sociability with the need for solitude. Some people sit on the ground eating, their legs crossed beneath them. Others are engaged in prayer. Everyday life seems to be mixed with a sense of the extraordinary, and the residents of the city rub shoulders with pilgrims from across the Shi'i world.

The *ulamas*, the religious scholars who wear turbans and *'abayas*, can be seen making their way through this bustling movement every morning as they go to classes. The first begins at 7 a.m., and before it starts *ulamas* and students of every age and level flood into the city centre. Many of them will have got up early for dawn prayers and will already have spent several hours reading or studying. Some will also have already visited the shrine of Imam 'Ali as an act of piety. Classes take place throughout the morning in various places, among them the Al-Gharawiyya School in the shrine itself and other places in the sanctuary, as well as at neighbouring mosques and in the houses of the teachers. As one classroom fills up with students, all wearing turbans, groups of students in another gather around their teachers. Elsewhere the students work in pairs, one going over lecture notes as the other listens. The most advanced students attend classes and teach more junior ones at the same time, and experienced *ulamas* often give several classes. After midday prayers and lunch, the *ulamas* rest for a while and then go back to studying. The day finishes with social activities or work at a cultural or religious institution.

This traditional system of teaching is characteristic of the *hawza*, the Shi'i religious school in Najaf. The *ulamas* who work in it call it a 'free' school because it allows complete freedom of study: the students are free to choose their teachers and the level of their classes, and they are even able to decide their own ability and the subjects they wish to study. The teachers of the *hawza* decide on the content, time and place of the classes they wish to teach, agreeing on these with the students. This system of joint decision-making reinforces the connections between the teachers and the students, and is the basis of a system of teaching that depends on the oral transmission of knowledge. It is a system that links the students to the teachers and goes back to the early imams themselves. It is said that this method of teaching was founded by Shaykh al-Tusi (d. 1067 CE), who is often described as having also been the 'founder' of the *hawza*. The shaykh's house is situated next to the mausoleum where he is buried, and has now been turned into a mosque where classes are held. However, even before Shaykh al-Tusi arrived in Najaf there were scholars teaching the religious sciences near the tomb of Imam 'Ali. The shaykh settled there after the Seljuk occupation of Baghdad in 1056 CE, and played a leading role in reformulating the religious sciences of Shi'i Islam.

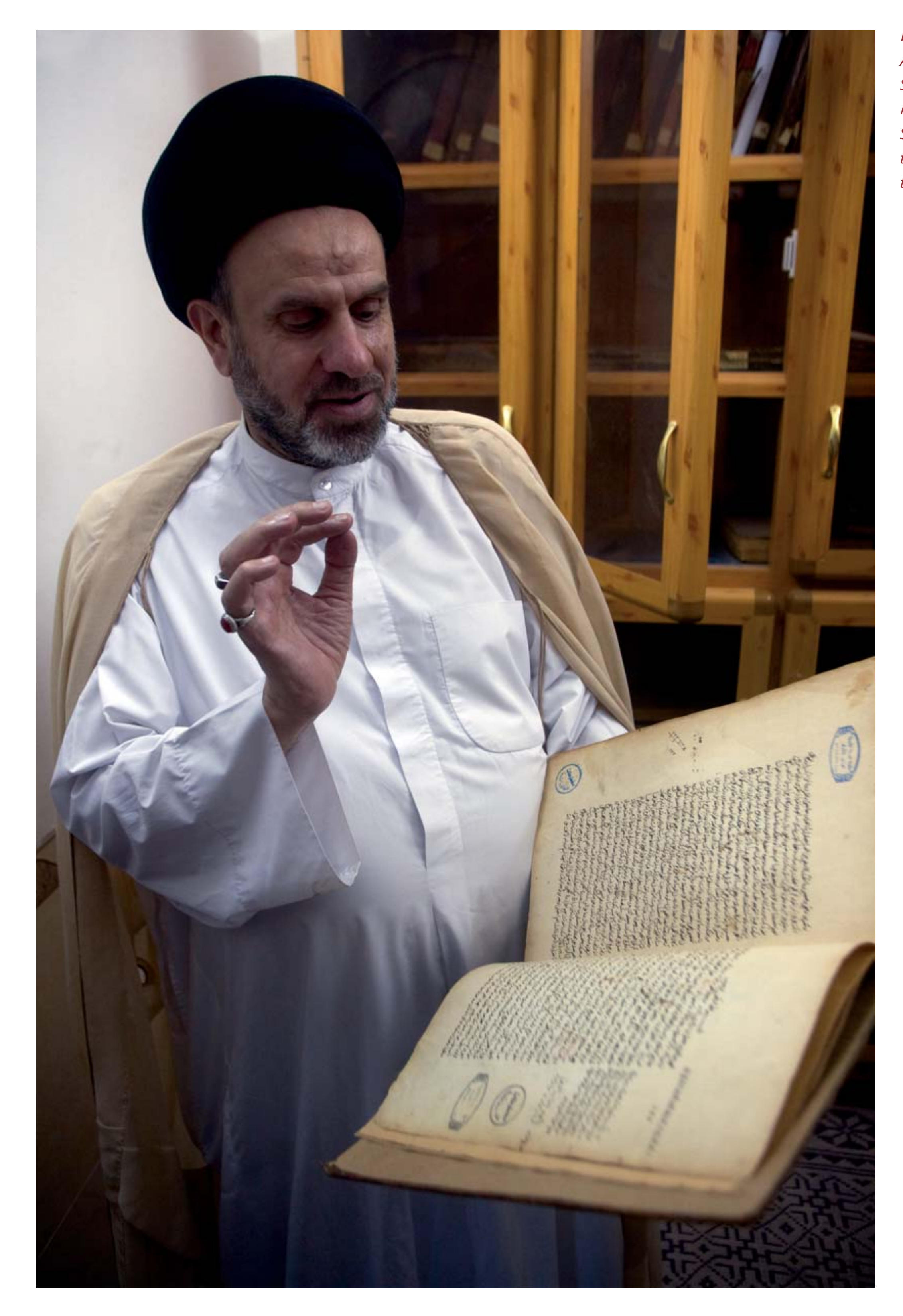
Following this early period in Najaf's history, other cities such as Hilla began to play important roles as centres of Shi'i teaching, and Najaf entered a period of decline. Yet Ibn Battuta mentions the schools where the students and Sufis lived in his account of the city. These schools were lived in by foreigners, who stayed there for several years in order to study, a system which is still in use today. The institutions that are called *madrasas* (schools) in Najaf are actually boarding schools in which each student has his own small room and the use of common facilities such as the library. All the students follow the rules of these schools, which set the pattern for the ascetic lives that are lived in them. In the past it was the search for knowledge that led young men to leave their homes and come to Najaf to find teachers and benefit from the presence of Imam 'Ali, 'the gate of knowledge' as one *hadith* puts it. This is still the case today.



Piety and asceticism are the rule and the way of life of the hawza. Ulamas *and students praying at the Al-Shubbariyya School.*

Like the neighbouring holy city of Karbala, Najaf regained its importance during the Safavid period (1501–1722 CE), but its real recovery came as a result of the revival of the religious sciences that took place after the victory of the rationalist, or *usuli*, current over the literalist, or *akhbari*, one in Twelver Shi'ism at the end of the twelfth/eighteenth century[19]. Islamic law and legal method were developed and extended by *ulamas* working in the school of Najaf, and this meant that they were able to use sophisticated intellectual tools to infer religious doctrines from the Qur'an and the *hadith*. The practice of interpretation, or *ijtihad*, and the application of the religious law itself were extended to social and, even more importantly, political issues that had not previously been dealt with, extending the *ulamas'* field of expertise and thus their influence.

In extending their authority to such areas the *ulamas* made use of the principle that they, as 'vice-regents'



Head of the Al-Shubbariyya School Sayyid Muhammad Amin Shubbar shows off the books in the school's library.

of the Hidden Imam, could act in his name and claim some of his prerogatives when leading the community. As a result, Shi'i scholars who up until this point had tended to accommodate themselves to the wishes of the political authorities started to get involved in matters that not only concerned society but also had to do with politics. The Najafi scholar Ja'far Al Kashif al-Ghita' (d. 1812 CE) pioneered this view when he declared that *jihad* was legitimate against the Russians who at the time were encroaching on the country, and threw his weight behind the war that was being waged against them by Fath Ali Shah, the Qajar prince.

Two other Najafi scholars, each considered to be among the most eminent Shi'i scholars of his time, also made major contributions to the revived *usuli* Shi'ism that continues to be the dominant current today. The first of these was Muhammad Hasan al-Najafi (d. 1850 CE), who spent thirty years writing an encyclopaedia of Shi'i jurisprudence. This book, *The Jewels of Discourse* (*jawahir al-kalam*), is still used as a work of reference in Shi'i schools today. The second was a Persian scholar from Dizful, Murtada al-Ansari (d. 1864 CE), who travelled and studied in various places for many years before eventually settling in Najaf. He then started to attend classes in the city and began teaching in his turn, soon attracting hundreds of students. The influence of his teaching grew, and his fame crossed national borders. Money in the form of the religious taxes that are paid by believers started to pour in, and was distributed among the students. Among Murtada al-Ansari's many works two in particular are considered to be major contributions that are still essential reading for clerics today. The first is his book on commercial law, *The Earnings* (*al-makasib*), and the second is his book on legal method entitled *The Epistles* (*al-rasa'il*). These works were watersheds in Shi'i religious law, and they have never really been surpassed.

It was another disciple of Murtada al-Ansari, also a Persian who had settled in Najaf, who later took another decisive step forward in the development of Shi'i law, the main component in the religious studies on which the authority of the clerics depends. Muhammad Kazim al-Khurasani (d. 1911 CE), was born in Tus, and studied philosophy in Tehran before continuing his studies in Najaf. He had the self-confidence that comes from having been taught by the best teachers, and when he began to present his own ideas in his teaching of legal method, students flocked to hear him. It is said that al-Khurasani had as many as 1,200 students, and he trained many well-known clerics whose fame was recognized by succeeding generations. 'Akhund', as al-Khurasani was called, also wrote a book entitled *Sufficiency of Principles* (*kifayat al-usul*) which later attracted extensive commentary. Influenced by philosophy, the book is a difficult work which makes a major contribution to the systematization of legal method but which also requires a great deal of commentary and interpretation. Together with the work of Murtada al-Ansari, it is a cornerstone of advanced study in all Shi'i religious schools. Reading and understanding it is a kind of rite of passage.

The curriculum of the *hawza* was divided into three phases, the first two of which were intended to help students acquire miscellaneous knowledge with a particular concentration on Islamic law. Students were expected to familiarize themselves with the Arabic language, the language of the religious texts. They studied grammar (syntax and morphology) and the forms of rhetoric that were explained in the classical texts, which they were often also expected to memorize. Once they had done so, they could then move on to logic, another essential step in training the mind and acquiring the basic methods of reasoning. These skills having been acquired, the students could begin the study of Islamic law and legal method, while at the same time taking classes in less central religious sciences such as qur'anic exegesis, the study of the *hadith* (the Traditions) and their transmitters, and scholastic theology.


النجف الأشرف
النجف الأشرف



◤ *The history of the* ulamas *is part of the history of Najaf. Here, a photo exhibition held in 2012.*

One course that is very popular with the advanced students is that of Shaykh Muhammad Baqir al-Irawani, one of Najaf's leading great masters, who teaches in the Al-Gharawiyya School in the shrine of Imam 'Ali.

These subjects were complemented by the study of literature and poetry, moral values and the etiquette between students and teachers. Later came philosophy. These subjects are still taught in Najaf today as part of the traditional system of education. Until the beginning of the fourteenth/twentieth century, when students did not follow any system of education apart from that dispensed by the religious schools, they also had to study basic mathematics and sometimes the natural sciences, subjects which today are taught in government schools. However, even a student who was a university graduate – above all if he came from a non-Arabic-speaking country – had to take classes in Arabic at the *hawza*, using texts that were often difficult to understand and that had been written in the traditional manner by the *ulamas*.

Class sessions consisted of reading texts line by line under the direction of a teacher, who would give the kind of detailed explanations that he had received from his own teachers. The classes lasted for around three-quarters of an hour, and generally took place in the mornings. The students then worked in pairs, each explaining the material to the other in order to make sure that each had fully understood it. This method, still in use in Najaf today, is a characteristic feature of the *hawza* and a source of pride among the clerics. It creates strong bonds among the students that they are able to build upon later in their careers, and these bonds are useful whether the students later work in Najaf or elsewhere in the world. Some of the legal works that are studied in the *hawza* are in several volumes, and it takes three or four years to read them. While there is no strictly defined course of study in the institution even today, there are conventions regarding the order in which the books are to be studied, even if this order is not obligatory. Since the students at the *hawza* are free to choose their own classes and there is no selection on entry, it is possible to skip some parts of the curriculum, though this can cause difficulties later. However, the system is still much more elitist than it can appear, since to master the material necessary to graduate a student needs to comprehend its rules, which are sometimes explicitly and sometimes only implicitly stated, and demonstrate perseverance and humility.

A journey of initiation

In the past, life in Najaf was often difficult for the young clerics, and many of them had to leave their families and begin a long journey into the unknown in order to study in the city with its famous teachers. As an example, Muhsin al-Amin, a scholar from Jabal 'Amil (today in South Lebanon), wrote in his autobiography that in 1891 it took a month to reach the holy city by sea, on foot or by riding on a donkey.[20] For those coming from the Indian subcontinent, there were other dangers that had to be faced before arriving in the city, including sickness, robbery, fatigue and often considerable deprivation. Once they had arrived in Najaf, the most fortunate students were able to rent a room, find a place in a *madrasa*, or settle with relatives already living there. Clerical families who regularly sent their sons to Najaf to study often acquired a house in the city especially for this purpose.

Having found a place to live, the students had to get used to the harsh climate of the city, including the bitter cold of winter and the furnace-like heat of summer. There were also poverty, sickness, and scorpions and other insects to contend with, and there was a lack of water, something that Muhammad Jawad Mughniyya, another Lebanese cleric who lived in Najaf in the 1920s, mentions in his memoirs.[21] In order to survive, the students earned money copying manuscripts, did various part-time jobs, or recited the Qur'an at religious ceremonies. This supplementary work added to the already ascetic character of their



studies and the almost physical character of having to be entirely focused on the pursuit of knowledge. Minds and bodies were affected by this, if only because the young clerics must have developed painful cramps as a result of squatting on their heels for long periods without moving. Even today, when classes take place in spaces that are far more comfortable than they once were, the idea that the search for knowledge is a form of self-sacrifice remains a strong one. Like any other educational centre, Najaf obviously has its own fair share of less-motivated students and those who are stimulated mainly by ambition. However, there is nevertheless a scholarly atmosphere reigning in the city, and this is encouraged by the clerics who want to live according to the same ideals that they promote. A strict regard for personal standards of conduct, good manners and respect for teachers is added to a scrupulous respect for the religious teachings.

At the end of their preliminary studies, the budding clerics delve into challenging works by Murtada al-Ansari and Akhund al-Khurasani. Some of them eventually return to their places of origin in order to take up religious positions or teach. However, other students then begin their advanced studies, which theoretically do not only consist of reading books. The teachers, now giving classes to groups of students a good many of whom are already wearing turbans, are no longer concerned to give instruction in material that should by this point have been acquired, but instead aim to initiate the students into the practice of a complex critical method. Classes deal with precise points of Islamic law, while in-depth discussions of particular topics continue from one day to the next. The teacher presents the opinions of the leading *ulamas*, including his own, together with supporting arguments. His aim is to train the students in the practice of interpretation, or *ijtihad*, and make them capable of inferring legal rulings on their own.



Ulamas *form a united and cohesive group, with strong ties of solidarity, personal affinities and sometimes family links.*

The most advanced students and the most persevering are invited to put forward their own opinions, with the teacher defending his own views or encouraging the students in theirs. Such classes take place every day for years, and those who are considered by their peers and teachers to have mastered the exercise of *ijtihad* are noticed during discussions. Whether or not they are awarded a qualification (*ijaza*) in *ijtihad* at the end of this training period, and whether such recognition remains informal or implicit, the successful students should be well qualified to expound the rulings of Shari'a law.

It is this traditional system of education, still in use in Najaf today, that forms the basis of the instruction given at the *hawza*. This system continues the religious traditions and ensures that the clerics form a cohesive and united group when seen from the outside, even if from an internal perspective they are divided by personal rivalries, doctrinal controversies or political arguments. Religious authority is handed down from one generation to the next as a result of this system, and is expressed in the views of the clerics best qualified to practise *ijtihad*. It is also within the *hawza* that the individual or individuals who hold supreme authority in guiding the community of Shi'i believers, the men called *marja'*, are trained and emerge.

'Emerge' is the relevant word here since there is no formal system of election or appointment, and there is no system of hereditary transmission either. Instead, there is a complex process in which various lobbying groups and individuals are involved in choosing the *marja'*. This includes senior teachers in the *hawza*, the institution's students, as well as people from Shi'i business and financial circles, political actors and heads of state, and the community of believers. These different groups and individuals try to use their influence to promote their favoured candidates, with varying degrees of success. Meanwhile, the criteria that are used in selecting the *marja'* are underpinned by historical and inherited usage.

The most important factor that is taken into account when choosing the *marja'* is his knowledge, since he should necessarily be the most learned scholar of his time. However, since it is not feasible to test the knowledge of the leading *ulamas* or to place them in rank order, the number of students each one has is taken into account, as students tend to be drawn to the best teachers. The greatest Najaf scholars and those whose works have had the most impact on Shi'i doctrines, men like Murtada al-Ansari, Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei (d. 1992 CE) and the famous 'Akhund' himself, all trained hundreds of students. Even so, this method of evaluation is not always relevant, since a current *marja'*, 'Ali al-Sistani, does not engage in teaching even though he is widely recognized as being the most learned Shi'i scholar of his time because he has the greatest number of followers.

Other factors that come into play when selecting the *marja'* include moral probity, respect for religious law and piety. However, as Jawad al-Khoei has emphasized, though these factors operate as guiding principles, 'the qualities of the *marja'* are open to discussion'.

According to many Shi'i writers, the institution of the *marja'*, the *marja'iyya*, was established after the occultation of the twelfth imam. In this view, in order to make up for the absence of the legitimate holder of religious authority, the imam himself, there needs to be a scholar who will stand in for him and who is agreed to be the best scholar of his time. There have obviously been many Shi'i *ulamas* since the fourth/tenth century, and it was these *ulamas* who developed over time the doctrines that underpin the institution of the *marja'iyya*. As a result the *marja'iyya* as it exists today was only institutionalized from the second half of the thirteenth/nineteenth century, and continues to develop today. Moreover, each *marja'* adapts the position to his individual views and to external developments. However, the overall function is clear: in the absence of the imam himself, the best of the leading clerics, whether a single individual or a group,

will act in his name and will be responsible for defining the doctrines of the religion for the benefit of believers who are not themselves able to discern them.

The believers act on what the leading clerics say, and the latter make use of mechanisms that include middle-ranking clerics or even trusted lay individuals to propagate their views and rulings. It should be clear why such mechanisms took a decisive turn at the beginning of the fourteenth/twentieth century, since it was then that new means of communication such as the telegraph allowed news and the decisions of the religious leaders to be sent out more quickly, creating tighter bonds between the leaders and their followers. These new means of communication helped Najaf to become the world's leading Shi'i religious centre. The city soon acquired very distinguished masters, including men of Arab, Persian, Turkish and other descent, and students started to come to it from all parts of the world. Thanks to the telegraph and other such technological innovations, by the early decades of the fourteenth/twentieth century the views of Najaf's religious leaders could reach far beyond the city itself.

As a result, Najaf became the seat of the *marja'iyya* and the centre of the Shi'i world, and even neighbouring Iran began to look towards it for guidance. The great Persian masters who lived in Najaf at this time, particularly Akhund al-Khurasani and his student Muhammad Husayn al-Na'ini (d. 1936 CE), played an important role during the constitutional movement that shook Iran between 1906 and 1911 CE, for example. Al-Khurasani supported the movement's aims, which included limiting the powers of the shah by a new constitution and a parliament that represented the people. He and other Persian *ulamas* in Najaf sent telegrams and issued *fatwas* in support of such ideas. They also did their best to combat the foreign economic domination of Iran that was being promoted by the shah at the time, and fought against monarchical rule using all the means at their disposal: in other words such Islamic principles as the 'commanding of good and the forbidding of evil'. Al-Khurasani was both a progressive and a modernist thinker, and he also supported the establishment of modern schools for the city's children.

The period thus saw the emergence of new ways of thinking about Islam and different forms of government among the senior clerics in Najaf, as well as the emergence of political claims and internal divisions along political lines, since some of the clerics did not share the views of the city's 'liberal wing'. This was the case with Muhammad Kazim al-Yazdi (d. 1918 CE), a senior cleric who succeeded al-Khurasani as the leader of the *ulamas*. He wrote a treatise on Islamic law that set out the legal doctrines practically and clearly, and Shi'i believers could easily refer to it in order to live in accordance with the views of the religious authorities. This work, *The Most Solid Link* (*al-'urwa al-wuthqa*), has attracted extensive commentary, and it is still treated as an important work of reference. Following its publication, other leading clerics wanting to attain the position of *marja'* or exercise supreme religious authority (*marja'iyya*) began to announce their 'candidacy' in the same way by producing similar treatises. Writing books of this sort became a way of making it known that a particular cleric considered himself to be ready and able to guide those believers who wanted to follow him.

As soon as a new *marja'* emerges according to the process outlined above, people start to follow his opinions and pay him religious taxes *(khums)*. The *marja'* then redistributes these in religiously appropriate ways, for example by funding the religious schools that are under his authority through paying the salaries of the teachers and giving grants to the students, or by building mosques, establishing dispensaries, orphanages or other charitable institutions, endowing libraries, or other activities.



Najaf has a great number of public and private libraries where students can find the books they need.

These are ways of spreading the influence of the religion and of the *marja'* himself, since as a result his authority increases along with the number of his followers. The process gives rise to a virtuous circle, as more followers mean more money paid in taxes, and more money means more funds to finance more institutions. However, even more importantly this financial system guarantees the economic independence of the *marja'iyya* and the *hawza* from the state. It is here that the system's true importance lies, since the *marja'* himself lives a very simple life and has very few needs. Anyone visiting the *marja'* in Najaf today will be struck by the fact that though the holders of the office head religious institutions that have branches throughout the world, they themselves live very simple lives, receiving visitors in modest buildings where their followers, like their important guests, are expected to sit cross-legged on foam mattresses on the ground.

Jawad al-Khoei: opening up Najaf to the outside world

The grandson of the famous marja' *Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei (d. 1992 CE), Sayyid Jawad al-Khoei grew up in England before going on to study religious sciences in Qom for ten years. Returning to London, he took a BA degree in theology but then chose to go back to Najaf where he settled in 2010. He started advanced studies at the traditional* hawza *with leading teachers while at the same time taking literature classes with a specialist in the first/eighth-century grammarian al-Sibawayh and working towards a doctorate at a university in Amman, Jordan. Today he also has his own students, and he brings cherished values such as the search for knowledge, tolerance and openness to the Other to all his projects and activities. One of his most ambitious projects is to open a new kind of school near the shrine of Imam 'Ali in the al-Buraq district of Najaf.*

'We should build on the strong points of each system, the traditional and the modern,' al-Khoei says. For this reason, the school that he is setting up will have two main divisions. The first, traditional, will give courses on the hawza *model, while the second will be a modern college that teaches different religions and religious doctrines, and will be licensed by the Ministry of Higher Education. 'We want specialists from each religion to give classes in the school,' Jawad al-Khoei says, 'as we don't want to put words into their mouths as the Shi'a used to do in the past. It will be the responsibility of these specialists to explain their religious beliefs.'*

When it is completed, the new school will have 200 student rooms, along with guest rooms for foreign researchers, classrooms and seminar rooms, and a public library containing more than 4,000 manuscripts. The project dates back to al-Khoei's grandfather, who carried out the preparatory work by buying the land. The young sayyid, *a member of a new generation of clerics who have experience of life abroad, has now turned it into a project that will promote knowledge of other religions and cultures.*

'We intend to concentrate on what we share so that people will be able to live together better,' Jawad al-Khoei says. The emphasis on monotheism and on doctrines and values held in common by those professing different faiths should, he thinks, allow such exchanges to take place. Al-Khoei is developing these ideas through his school project and within the framework of the Iraqi Council for Interfaith Dialogue, founded in Baghdad on 14 March 2013 after three years of dialogue between Muslim and Christian clerics.

In setting up the Council, Jawad al-Khoei worked with a Dominican, Father Amir Raji, and an academic who specializes in religious minorities, Sa'd Sallum, who is also the president of the Masarat Foundation and the editor of a journal of the same name. These three men are members of a committee that is working to promote a culture of dialogue, the Council being an important step in this direction. It is intended to help reinforce dialogue between the religious minorities in Iraq and to work towards equality and the protection of minorities, with the purpose of maintaining pluralism in Iraqi society. For Jawad al-Khoei, Najaf is a natural place for this dialogue to occur.



Sayyid Jawad al-Khoei at home in Najaf.

Sufficiency of Principles,
a book by Akhund Khurasani, is a cornerstone of advanced studies, both in the traditional and in the reformed systems of learning. Here, a commentary to the book by Shaykh Muhammad 'Ali al-Qummi, published in 1925.

Modern challenges to the hawza

The involvement of senior Shi'i clerics in political struggles increased after the end of the Ottoman Empire and during the establishment of the British Mandate in Iraq and the modern Iraqi state. They declared *jihad* against the British forces between 1914 and 1916 CE, and they were involved in the uprising that took place in Najaf in 1918. In 1919 leading *ulamas* of Persian origin resident in Najaf demanded the establishment of an independent Arab and Islamic state, and Shi'i *ulamas*, among them *ulamas* from Najaf, led the uprising against the British that took place in 1920. The latter was put down by British forces, and its leaders were forced into exile in 1923. Those who eventually returned were obliged to keep a low profile, and there was a decline in the number of *ulamas* teaching at the *hawza*.

However, at the same time the centralization of the *marja'iyya* in Najaf led to the reorganization of the institution. Abu al-Hasan al-Isfahani (d. 1946 CE) was a disciple of al-Khurasani who, like him, came from Iran in order to study, and stayed on to become a *marja'*. His period in office was characterized, among other things, by greater attention being paid to administrative matters. Senior clerics in Najaf had got used to the idea of sending out personal emissaries to other areas in order to propagate their ideas. Al-Isfahani systematized this practice, opening offices far from Najaf in order to strengthen ties with his followers. This system then took off, and after al-Isfahani's period in office every *marja'* had emissaries or offices in all regions of the world where the faithful lived or where they were likely to want to refer to them. These emissaries, either clerics themselves or lay figures, distributed the writings and *fatwas* of the *marja'* and collected religious taxes on his behalf.

Each *marja'* was thus well prepared to give his views on the issues of the time and to respond to them in his own way. From the beginning of the 1940s onwards, Shi'i clerics no longer led the fight against European imperialism, since their priority now was to halt the spread of the Marxist or communist ideas that were gaining ground among Iraq's youth, including among the offspring of the *ulamas.* This struggle preoccupied first Muhammad Husayn Al Kashif al-Ghita' (d. 1954) and then Muhsin al-Hakim (d. 1970). Al-Hakim encouraged the formation of the Society of the Ulamas in 1959, a group of clerics that was dedicated to halting the spread of communist ideas. In February 1960, Muhsin al-Hakim issued a *fatwa* ruling that any connection with the Communist Party was unlawful.[22]

However, there were also other challenges facing the traditional *marja'iyya*, among them the Iraqi Ba'ath Party and the appearance of clerics promoting a more political and ideological vision of Islam. Among the latter was Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, a jurist trained at the *hawza* who argued against both communism and western-style liberalism in two works, one on economics and the other on philosophy, and set out vigorous criticisms of both systems. He was also among the founders of the initially underground Islamic political party al-Da'wa. Al-Sadr led moves to modernize the *hawza*, though he was unwilling to compromise regarding the level of teaching: hence he wrote a book on legal methods that drew on the classical texts.

In the 1970s, when protests took place in the holy cities and the Ba'athist regime was beginning its policy of repression against the Shi'i opposition and particularly the *ulamas*, al-Sadr emerged as the leader of the Islamic movement and the symbol of the opposition. At the same time, the Iranian cleric Ruhollah Khomeini, who had been living in exile in Najaf since 1964, left Iraq in 1978, and a few months later revolution broke out in Iran. Al-Sadr and his sister Bint al-Huda, the head of the women's movement, were both executed by the Ba'athist regime in April 1980.

A vast mausoleum is being built in Najaf today to house Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr's tomb. His legacy is claimed by all intellectual and Shi'i political movements. For the clerics of the *hawza* in the 1970s, al-Sadr had above all been one of them – a young *marja'*, full of ideas, who had tried to reform the institutions of the *marja'iyya* and the *hawza* in order to bring them more into line with contemporary society. It was this latter ambition that aligned al-Sadr with the reform movement that began at the end of the 1920s among young Najafi clerics who were criticizing the traditional system of instruction and demanded the rationalization of the *hawza*. These young clerics, of Iraqi, Iranian and Lebanese origin, had come together to publish their ideas, at first discreetly in *al-Hatif*, a newspaper edited by Ja'far al-Khalili. Moreover, in a petition presented in 1932, a group of clerics supported by famous *ulamas* demanded that instruction in the *hawza* be more organized. In 1935, the *Muntada al-Nashr* (publishing forum) was born, the objective being to publish books and open schools that would bring the pursuit of knowledge into line with the outside world while at the same time encouraging the continuation of classical Arab culture.

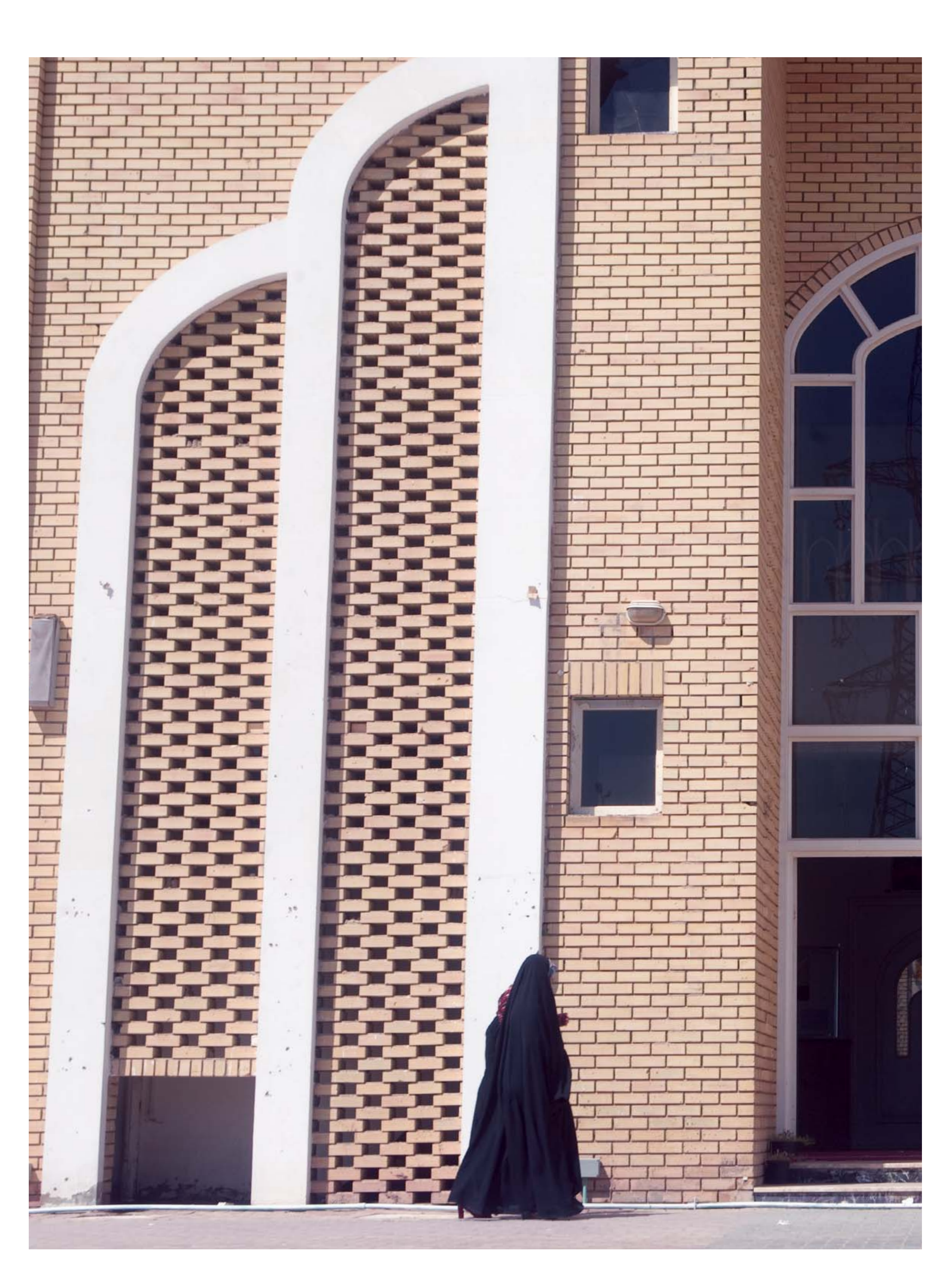
In 1960 CE senior clerics such as Muhammad Husayn Al Kashif al-Ghita', Muhammad Kalantar, 'Izz al-Din al-Jaza'iri and Muhsin al-Hakim opened schools to train students in the religious sciences, using methods that were more modern than those employed in the traditional *hawza*. The members of the *Muntada al-Nashr* thus made significant advances despite the general conservatism. The group's leader, Muhammad Rida al-Muzaffar (d. 1963), himself wrote textbooks that were designed to help students learn and were not the kind of complicated works that had been written by the *ulamas* for other *ulamas.* These textbooks are still in use in Najaf and in a good number of other Shi'i schools. In 1958 the group opened a College of Jurisprudence (*kulliyyat al-fiqh*) whose teaching methods were modelled on those used in universities. In addition to the traditional religious sciences, taught using the revised textbooks, the college also offered teaching in subjects such as literary criticism, English, and the basics of sociology and psychology.

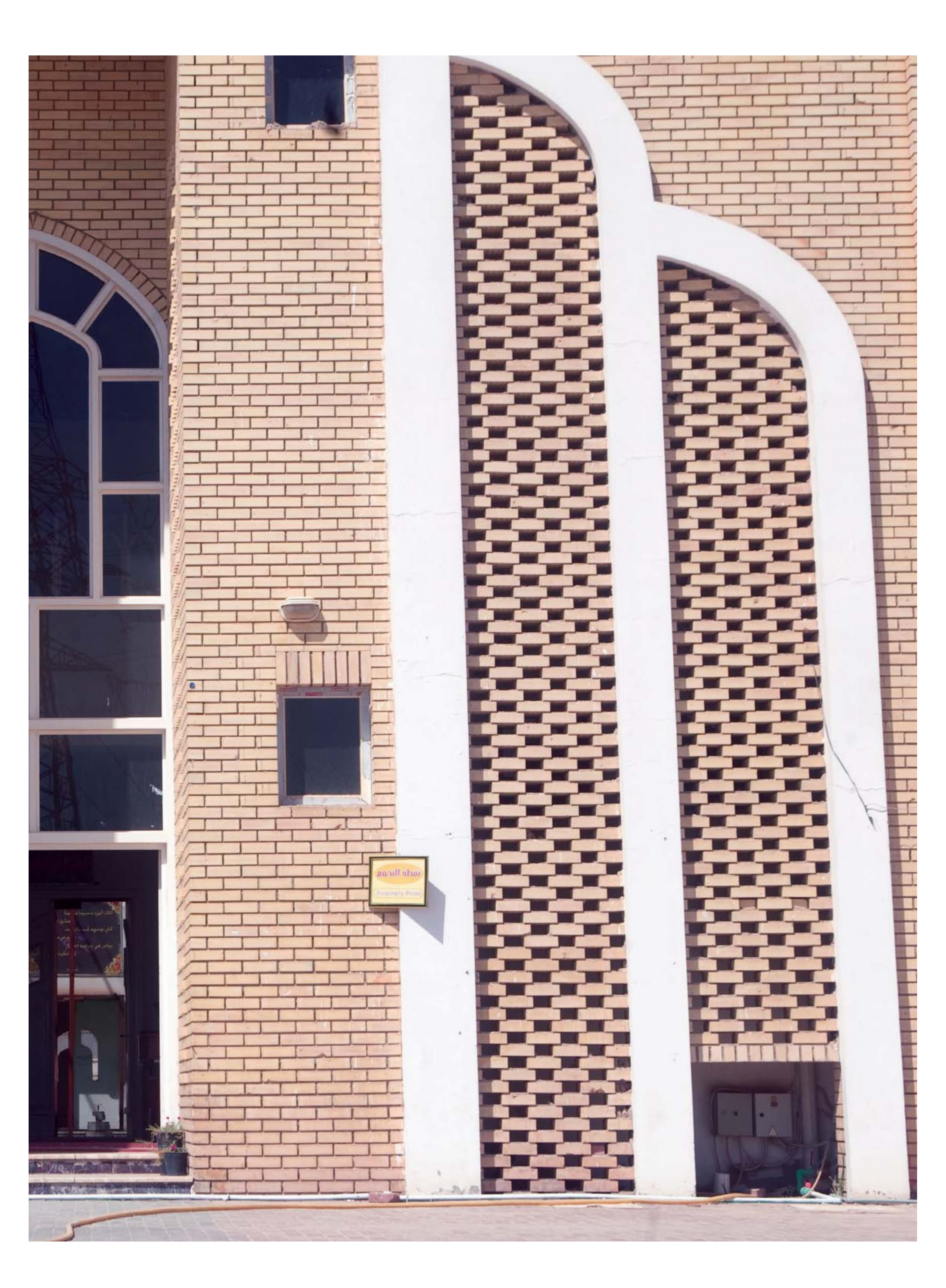
The college's founders wanted to train *ulamas*, preachers and teachers who were more aware of the issues raised by modern life and the responsibilities incumbent on clerics. It was much less elitist than the traditional *hawza* since the aim was to train 'middle-ranking' clerics who would be closer to the lives of ordinary people and who would work as teachers in government schools. These men would be properly trained in the religious sciences and would be capable of giving instruction in Islamic values. The college produced a remarkable generation of clerics and intellectuals who went on to study at university, at the *hawza* or in a mixture of the two systems. Among the leading figures of Shi'i religious culture that it produced was Ahmad al-Wa'ili (d. 2003), who pioneered a style of preaching that was at once scholarly, direct and emotionally meaningful for his audiences. The college was made part of the University of Iraq in 1974, and it remained so until 1991 when its assets were sequestrated by the government and the institution was closed. It had to wait until after the fall of Saddam Husayn in 2003 for its rebirth, when it was made part of the University of Kufa.



Sheikh 'Abbas Al Kashif al-Ghita' is a new-style cleric, both a man of religion and an academic with a doctorate who teaches at the College of Jurisprudence in the University of Kufa. In 1993, he set up the Al Kashif al-Ghita' Foundation which has a large collection of manuscripts and photographs open to the public.

The closure of the College of Jurisprudence was not the only blow dealt to the Shi'i schools in Najaf during the rule of the Ba'athist government in Iraq. *Madrasas* were demolished and *ulamas* and students expelled, some of them also being persecuted. The *hawza* entered a period of decline despite its being headed by Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei (d. 1992), a great scholar who had trained hundreds of clerics, and a *marja'* who was followed by Shi'a worldwide even in Iran under the rule of Ayatollah Khomeini. As a result, the city lost its essential substance – its masters and its students – as these took refuge in the *hawza* of Qom in Iran. The latter had been re-established in 1922 when *ulamas* expelled from Najaf by the British had settled there, and benefited particularly from the support given by the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran after 1979, as well as from the contributions made by *ulamas* from Najaf and the flow of students from abroad.





◤ *The entrance to the College of Jurisprudence, now part of the University of Kufa.*

A lecture at the Hawzat al-Zahra, a modern religious school for women founded by Muhammad al-Ya'qubi. Female students follow a curriculum similar to that used in men's schools and can study up to eight years. Those who want to subsequently pursue advanced studies with a marja' *join the traditional system.*

New ideas regarding the modernization of religious teaching emerged from this situation, together with a new type of cleric, wearing a turban and holding a doctorate at one and the same time. After the fall of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq in 2003, Najaf experienced a revival. Today, the city hosts around 15,000 students, with 1,000 new ones arriving each year. Some reformed and modern schools survived the earlier period of persecution, and new ones have since been opened, with more and more students following university courses during or after their religious studies. Moreover, senior *ulamas* who had originally trained in Najaf and who are thus the products of the city's school have now returned to the city to teach, having gained from their experiences abroad. As a result, the traditional *hawza* that has long been associated with Najaf is thriving again. It is still very much true to its traditions, and is as proud as ever of its free system of teaching which continues to produce great *marja'*. While classes have become more organized and formal examinations have been introduced, no radical changes have taken place in the basic curriculum, which is more or less the same as it was at the beginning of the fourteenth/twentieth century. Students at the *hawza* still choose their own teachers, and the leading *ulamas* still teach the traditions of which they are the guardians, with the *marja'iyya* at their head.

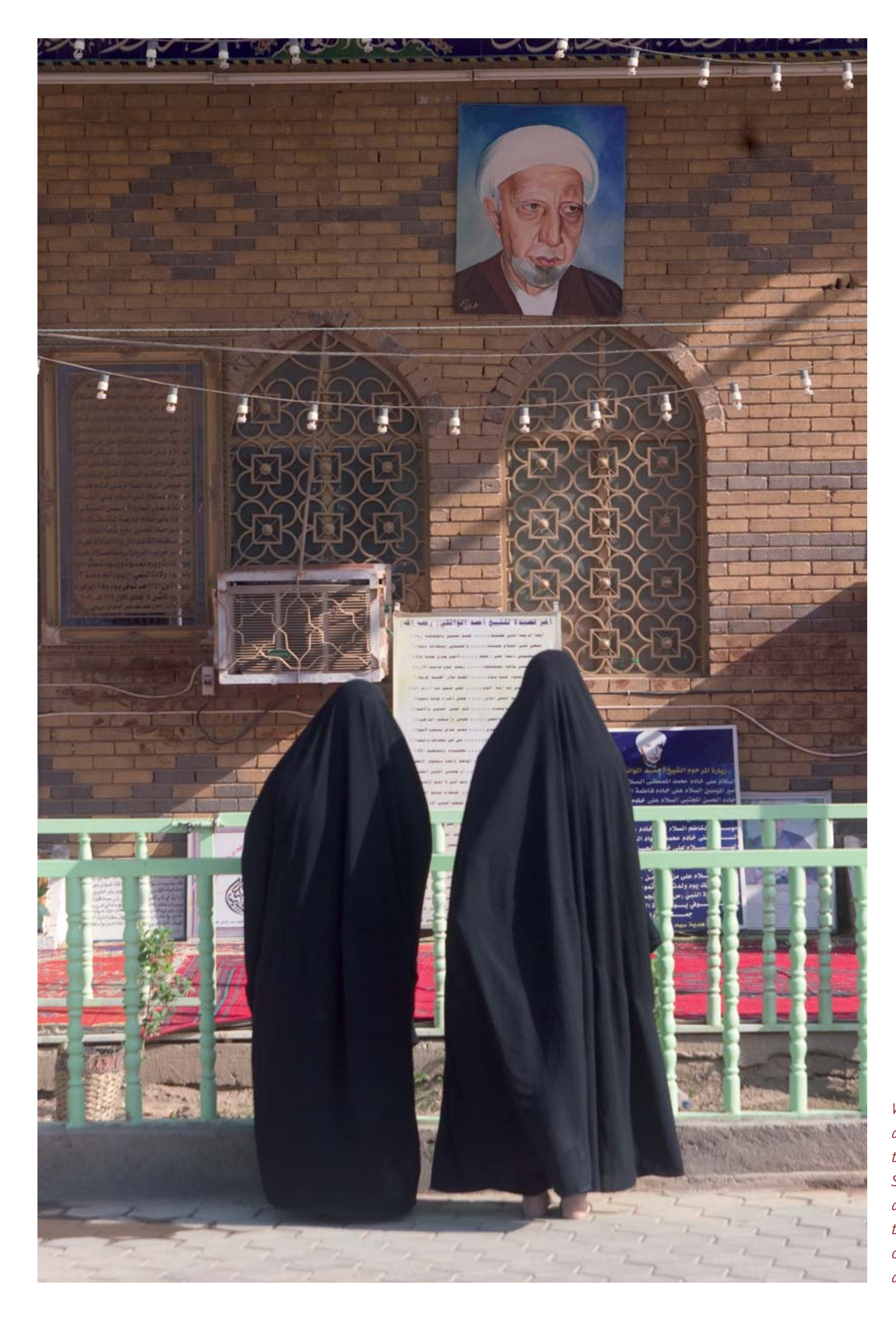
Furthermore, religious schools for female students have been opened since 2003. The history of Shi'i Islam includes some distinguished female figures, particularly in the medieval period. Some were scholars such as Shaykh al-Tusi's daughters, whereas others were manuscript copyists, or recited laments during mourning ceremonies. However over the course of time qur'anic schools for women disappeared and women were mostly able to study with their men relatives. Starting in the 1960s, the Islamic movement allowed women to regain access to the public space, in part thanks to the efforts of Bint al-Huda, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr' sister, who was like her brother assassinated by the Ba'athist regime.

A low-key women's movement was revived in the 1990s, in particular through the study of religious sciences. However its activities had to remain secret in order to escape repression. The movement grew in the 2000s particularly through the opening of educational institutions for women, who can study today in a handful of reformed religious schools, such as Al-Zahra, Dar al-Hikma and Shahid al-Mihrab. Some of them opt to study within the restricted circles of the traditional *hawza*, where some high clerics offer advanced teachings to female students and consider that the best among them can reach the level of *ijtihad*. All the women trained in religious sciences eventually teach other women, offer them advice, and explain the opinions of the *marja'* that particularly concern them

At present four *marja'* run the *hawza* in Najaf, with 'Ali al-Sistani at their head. Originally from a clerical family from Mashhad in Iran, Sayyid al-Sistani moved to Najaf at the beginning of the 1950s where he studied with Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, becoming a sort of successor to him. Like al-Khoei, al-Sistani has kept apart from politics, though he has not hesitated to make public pronouncements when major principles are at stake. He has far more followers than any of his peers, and he heads institutions and Islamic centres with branches across the world.

Ishaq Fayyad, a former student of al-Khoei originating from Afghanistan, is famous for his knowledge. Muhammad Sa'id al-Hakim is a member of a leading Najafi clerical family, involved in politics through the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq, and is the great nephew of Muhsin al-Hakim. The fourth *marja'* is Bachir al-Najafi. Originally from Pakistan, he moved to Najaf at the beginning of the 1960s. These four figures embody Najaf's religious tradition of the *marja'iyya* and run the activities of the *hawza*.





Women gather at the tomb of the famous preacher Shaykh Ahmad al-Wa'ili in the mausoleum of Kumayl Ibn Ziyad, a companion of 'Ali.

Near the shrine, the lively book market reflects the intellectual and cultural activity of the city.



Whereas al-Sistani does not teach, the other three *marja'* all teach advanced students in their own houses. None of them hesitates to make use of contemporary technology to propagate their ideas and strengthen their ties with their followers worldwide. Each of them has a website, uses social media and publishes work online.

Another more modernist *marja'*, and one who is also more engaged in political activities, should be added to these four leading figures. Muhammad al-Ya'qubi, a disciple of Muhammad al-Sadr who was assassinated in 1999, has founded his own political party, runs a religious school, and attracted many followers from across Iraq after his elevation to the rank of *marja'*.

Several other institutions are linked to the *hawza* and its leading clerics, including the research centres that produce scholarly work under the authority of the *marja'iyya*. In fact the whole of the old city seems to be devoted to the tasks of producing knowledge, advancing piety and promoting the love of religious literature. The names of the leading clerical families since the time of the city's revival in the thirteenth/nineteenth century bear witness to these activities. They include Bahr al-'Ulum, 'the ocean of sciences'; Al Kashif al-Ghita', 'the one who reveals what is hidden' (the name given to Ja'far al-Najafi from the title of his major work) and al-Jawahiri, derived from Hasan al-Najafi's *The Jewels of Discourse*. These illustrious clerical families continue to produce sons who become clerics in their turn, and also intellectuals and men of letters, such as Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri (d. 1997), a leading poet who, while being critical of his milieu, did not abandon his love of the Arabic language. Such men enjoy poetry contests, and they have long been known for their fondness for literary clubs and societies, some of which continue these traditions today. Finally, to the names of these members of famous Najafi families should be added the names of all those who have lived and studied for longer or shorter periods in the holy city and who have adopted the refined language and manners of the Najafi clerics.



Black turbans are only worn by sayyids, *the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.*

The ulamas’ tailor

‘Al-Ghadir Clothing for Ulamas (al-Wa’ili)’ reads a sign hung across a narrow street in the al-Huwaysh district of Najaf. Many tailors work in the souks of the old city, and some of them make the clothes worn by the ulamas that mark out these Shi‘i religious scholars. ‘Abbas al-Wa’ili specializes in these clothes, and, bent over his work in his shop, he explains a scholar’s dress.

Underneath, a religious scholar wears the ‘Indian suit’ (zay hindi) consisting of a shirt and pair of trousers made of white cotton. Over this, he wears a robe, either the jubba or the say. The jubba has a round collar. A more sophisticated style of dress than the say, it is worn for festivals, ceremonies and official meetings. It is also heavier than the say, and its inside pockets make it more practical. The jubba is split at the bottom on both sides, and its sleeves are a little on the large side for additional comfort.

The jubba is mostly worn by ulamas who have studied at the hawza, while preachers mostly wear the say. The robes are made to different standards of quality and in various colours depending on whether they will be worn for classes or on television. Made to measure, they cost around US$150, which might seem expensive for religious men living simple lives. ‘But these are good-quality clothes that last a long time,’ the tailor says.

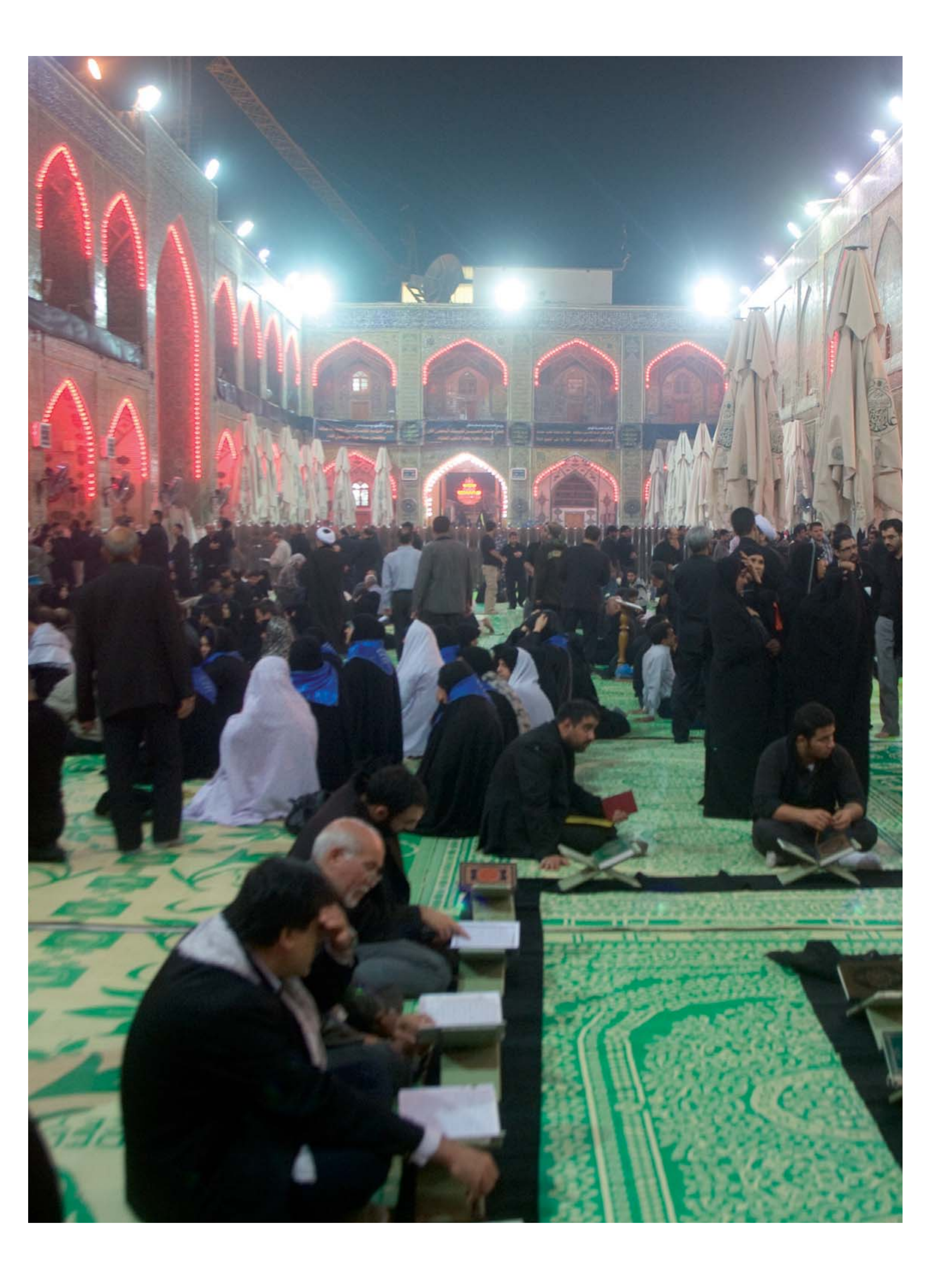
‘I don’t make turbans,’ he adds. Percale, a kind of high-quality cotton cloth, is needed for those, and Indian percale is better than Pakistani. The quality of the material can be checked by creasing it, and high-quality material costs around US$4 a metre. There are many different ways of arranging a turban, but in general the ulamas sit down and wrap the material around their bended knees. ‘Abayas, the robes the ulamas wear above their clothes, can be bought in a special souk that sells straightforward designs without embroidered decoration.

Students must complete their undergraduate studies and pass their exams before they can wear these clothes. Some wait until they are more advanced before they do so. The costume is completed with a pair of strap-on madas, a kind of slipper that can be easily put on and taken off, and is available in yellow, brown or black. A ceremony takes place when the clothes are worn for the first time, on a religious occasion like the commemoration of Ghadir Khum, the ascension to heaven (mi‘raj) of the Prophet Mohammed, or the anniversary of the birth of an imam.

This ceremony marks a rite of passage for the young ulamas, who from this day onwards have to show themselves to be worthy of the clothes they wear, particularly in their public behaviour. ‘They are not allowed to drink, eat or smoke in the street. Tradition also says that they are supposed to carry their watches in their pockets and not wear them on their wrists,’ ‘Abbas al-Wa’ili says.



‘Abbas al-Wa’ili at work in his shop at al-Huwaysh explains the scholars’ dress.





Pilgrimage to Najaf & Shi'i rituals



Offering food and tea is a meritorious act of charity performed during Muharram.

During the first ten days of the month of Muharram, the crowd visiting the shrine is larger and more fervent than usual.

All generations partake in the commemoration of the martyrdom of al-Husayn and the heroes of Karabala. In this procession, children recall the sufferings of al-Husayn's nephew, Qasim.

The rituals and ceremonials of Shi'ism have recently attracted a great deal of attention in the popular press, although much of it has focused on the most sensationalist of these practices, while dismissing other more pervasive and normative rituals. Furthermore, much of this journalistic reporting on Shi'i ritual has focused almost exclusively on their visible or tangible aspects without examining their broader context within the universal act of pilgrimage and their deep roots in Shi'i piety. Indeed, perhaps the most moving and spectacular of all Shi'i ritual practices is the communal gathering, particularly during Muharram, of pilgrims from the four corners of the world to participate jointly and peaceably in some of the largest religious festivals in the world. Many have travelled great distances and endured great hardships to reach their destination, and it is the journey in all its dimensions – the sense of community it fosters, the charity that supports it, and the complex rituals and ceremonies it entails – that truly defines the totality of the Shi'i pilgrimage experience. During these gatherings the city – its streets, markets, architecture, seminaries and shrines – comes alive, and history becomes part of the lived present.



A small float to be used in a procession. It is adorned with a classic depiction of 'Ali holding his sword, a lion lying at his feet.

The main theological imperative of this pilgrimage or religious visitation is to be near the imam, physically and spiritually: to honour him and offer him the absolute allegiance (*wala'*) that is due to him; to seek his intercession (*shafa'a*) with God; and to remember and relive his suffering and martyrdom. Once we understand this central principle and its corollaries, Shi 'i ritual becomes clearer and assumes a more elevated status, as a symbolic system manifested through prayers, gestures and performances that are enacted in order to bring the individual or the group closer to the living presence of the imam and ultimately towards God.

In addition to their symbolic dimension, these manifestations are deeply resonant among pilgrims, who experience a broad range of emotions – love and hate,



Tea glasses ready with sugar and awaiting the pouring of tea. They will be offered to passers-by.



In all the quarters of Najaf, residents prepare qima, *a meat stew in red sauce that cooks overnight in large cauldrons. It is given away to pilgrims during 'Ashura.*

sorrow and elation, anger and contentment – as they perform the various rituals. It follows then that the various actions and rituals that are discussed below – charity, visitation and prayer, chest-beating and flagellation, parades of flames, and the 'Ashura passion plays – are all intended to bring the pilgrim closer to the imam. According to Yann Richard, by visiting the shrines of the imams, the faithful in effect 'share in the pains of the Imams, weep with them, and together with them wage a symbolic battle against the forces of evil'.[23]

Charity, whether public or private, plays a crucial role in the logistics of travel and accommodation. Food and even some accommodation are provided to many needy pilgrims, and even those not in need may also benefit from this charity. The offering of food and especially water is a meritorious act during all Shi'i festivals, particularly 'Ashura, as it symbolically recalls al-Husayn and his followers dying of thirst and hunger during the battle of Karbala.



During Muharram, the city is filled with lights and portraits of the imams and the heroes of Karbala (here, al-Husayn). People stay out late at night.

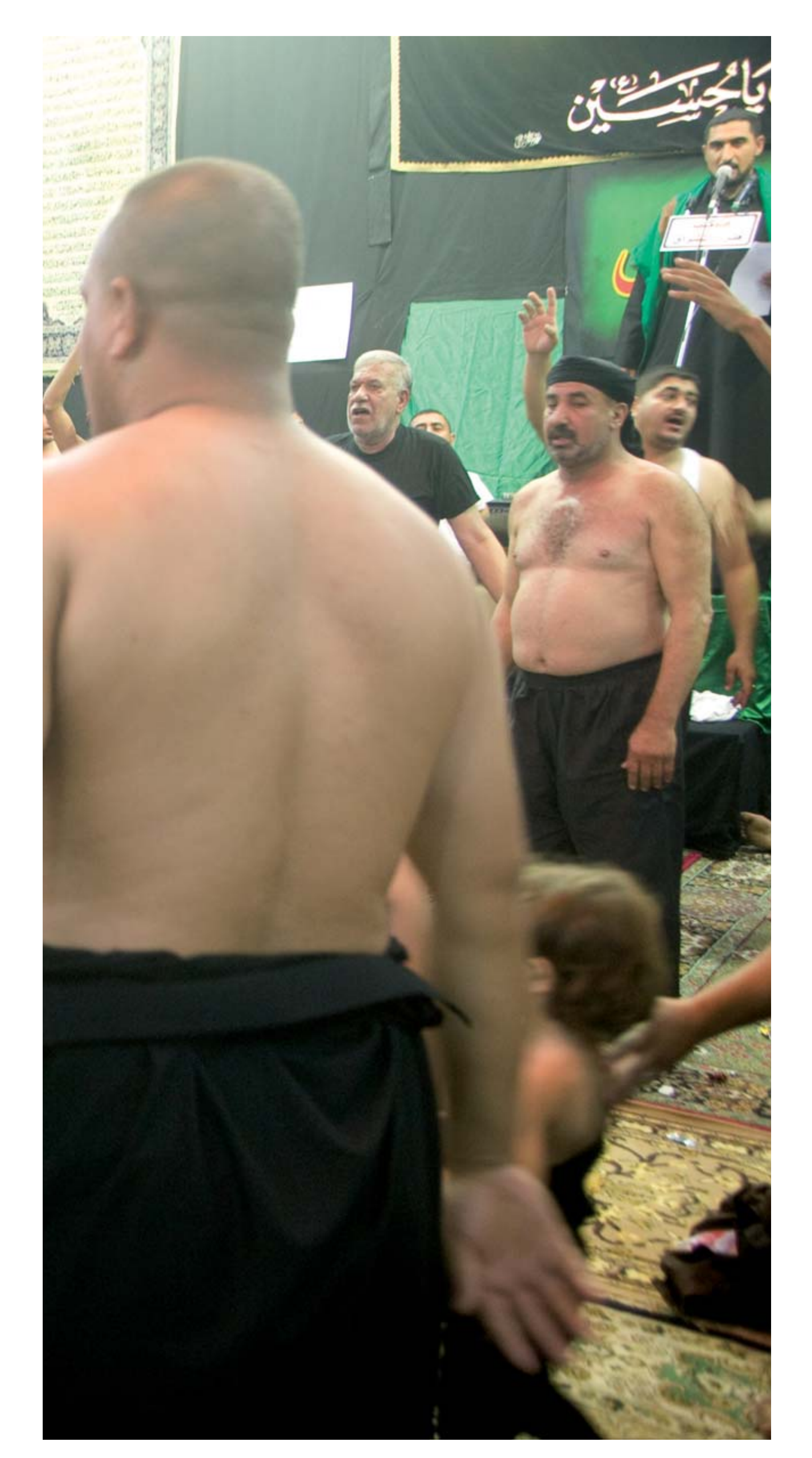
During ʻAshura – the first ten to twelve days of the month of Muharram –, and the Arbaʻin pilgrimage (*ziyara*) and ritual that follows forty days later, the roads from Kufa to Najaf and from Karbala to Najaf, in addition to all other Shiʻi provinces, are dotted with hundreds of stations offering water, soft drinks, food, places for worship and temporary shelter for all pilgrims travelling on foot or by motor vehicles. Likewise, no one goes hungry or thirsty in Najaf itself, whose sidewalks turn into little kitchens centred around huge cauldrons set over wood fires, which distribute soups or stews to the pilgrims.

Najaf, like other shrine cities in Iraq, possesses a large number of soup kitchens and canteens (*mudif*) that offer two hot meals a day to thousands of pilgrims, with the capacity multiplied during the high holidays. These meals are prepared daily in large kitchens that employ several cooks, servers and cleaners, some working for pay and many more



Some processions are led and punctuated by the sounds of drums and cymbals.





From the beginning of Muharram, mourning sessions are organised every evening. The crowd listens and cries to the epic of al-Husayn. Here, men perform lament by beating their chests.

volunteering their time. In order to be eligible for a meal, a person or a group must apply a day or two ahead of their arrival, so their tickets can await them at the entrance and a table is provided for them in the dining hall. Having benefited more than once from this charity, the authors can vouch for the efficiency of service and the quality, variety and cleanliness of the food and surroundings. This is a view shared by most pilgrims, some of whom are there to enjoy a good meal, but even more 'to eat at the table of the Commander of the Faithful', in the words of a young Lebanese woman.

These shrines come alive during daily and Friday rituals, and especially during the high holidays of the Shi'i calendar. At its most basic, a visit to the shrine entails performing an individual prayer in the spacious courtyard before proceeding, alone or led by a guide, to approach the shrine and greet Imam 'Ali as if he were a living person. The visitors then engage in physical and verbal rituals – including touching, rubbing, and grabbing the cenotaph, and reciting prescribed prayers and supplications (*du'a'*) – which serve to amplify the allegiance of the worshiper to the imam and enhance the strength of the imam's intercession (*shafa'a*). All parts of the ritual are fully described in little booklets, written in Arabic and Persian, which are available at the entrances to the shrines. These also describe the life of the imam, the significance of the shrine, the specific prayers to be made at different times, and the merits derived from the *ziyara*.[24]

Despite the importance of intercession by the imams and its overall acceptance by all Shi'i authorities, pilgrims to the shrine are often urged not to use the occasion to present an imam (either 'Ali or al-Husayn) with a long list of worldly requests, since such actions have more to do with the person making the appeal than with the imam himself. Rather, visitors to the shrine should be there, first and foremost, to honour the imam and remember his sacrifice, and only then to ask him humbly for his intercession with God.



Furthermore, *shafa'a* is best asked not for worldly goods – such as a new house or even a wife – but for matters that are beyond human capacity, such as cure from illness, or best, God's mercy.

A variety of more complex rituals are performed in Shi'i shrines. Most of these are general to all shrines, while a few are specific to a particular shrine, for instance in Najaf, Karbala or Mashhad. The Shi'i calendar is dotted with special events and holidays, much as is the Catholic calendar. These rituals include, in addition to the Friday prayer, the birthday (*mawlid*) of the Prophet Muhammad and his death day; birthdays and martyrdom days of the twelve imams, Fatima and other important descendants of the imams; *'ayd al-ghadir*, which commemorates the day on which the Prophet Muhammad invested Imam 'Ali with allegiance and succession (*walaya*); 'Ashura, or the tragic events of the first ten days of Muharram, culminating in the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn; and the Arba'in, or forty days after 'Ashura. There is no question, however, that celebrations of 'Ashura and the Arba'in represent the highest holiday of the Shi'i calendar, and they are the main focus of the discussion which follows.

Although all Shi'i celebrations are now huge public affairs, condoned and even encouraged by the authorities, this was not the case before the thirteenth/nineteenth century, when these rituals were largely conducted in the privacy of some homes or even in hidden cellars.[25] According to some scholars the transformation in ritual practice took place in the second half of the thirteenth/nineteenth century, and may be attributed to a number of temporal factors that coincided. First, the Wahhabi attacks on Najaf and Karbala in 1216/1801 shook Shi'ism to its core and provoked a reaction, which may have contributed to



the expansion of public observances. Second, these Wahhabi attacks also prompted large-scale conversion to Shi'ism among Iraqi pastoral tribes, leading them to settle on the outskirts of Najaf and other Shi'i towns. Third, and perhaps most important, was the pan-Islamist policy adopted by the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1867-1906), which led to an increasingly permissive attitude toward Shi'i rituals and practices.

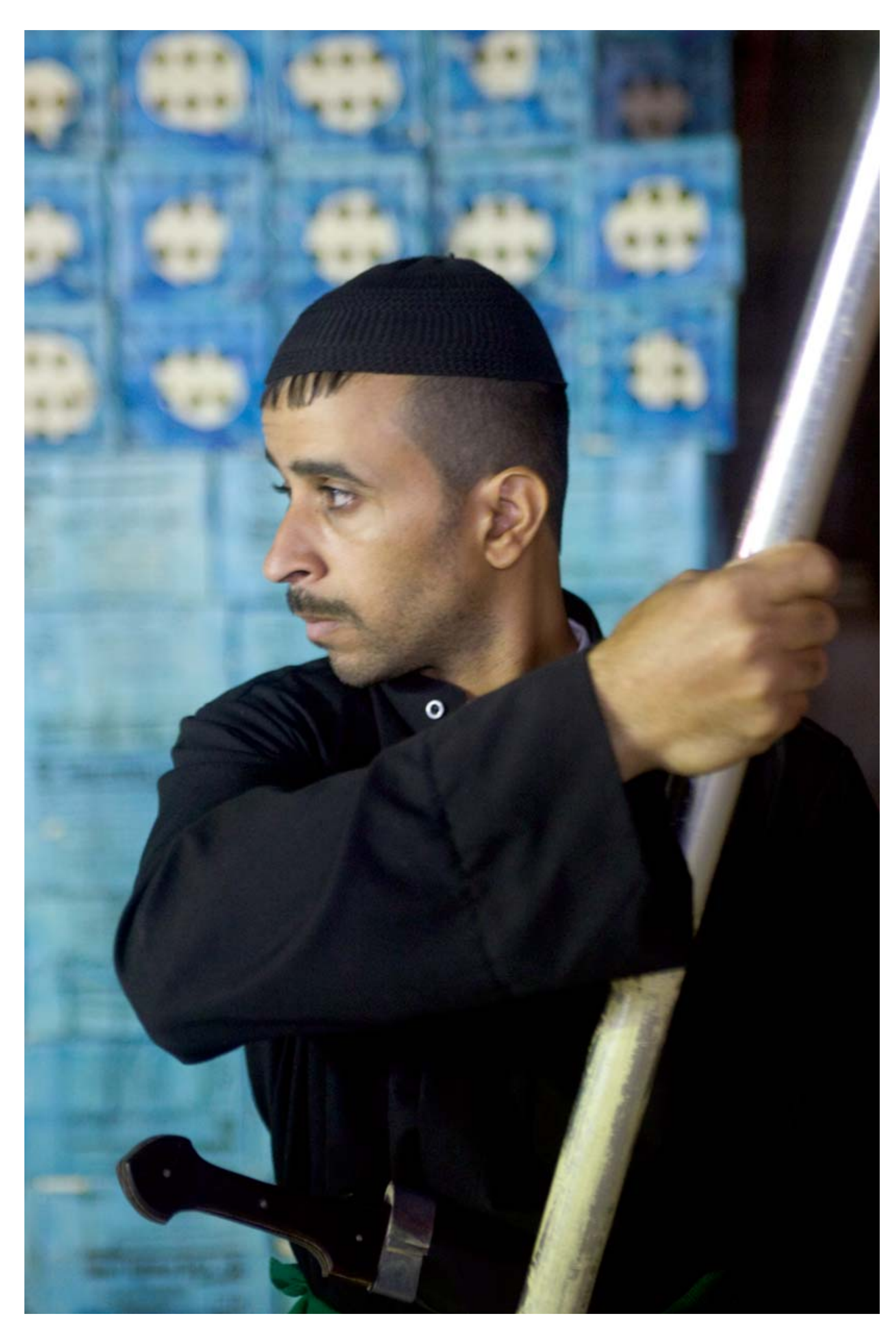
Men are ready for a procession in which they will ritually march with swords. Flags and standards recall the ones al-Husayn's companions flew at Karbala.

Nevertheless, throughout much of the fourteenth/twentieth century, spanning the periods of Monarchy and Ba'athist rule, there were frequent attempts to control or even curtail the public processions of 'Ashura and Arba'in, which were seen by successive Sunni governments either as a symptom of backwardness or as a potential threat to their sovereignty.[26] The period since 2003, on the other hand, has witnessed an astonishing expansion in the public aspect of Shi'i festivals, in Najaf and elsewhere.

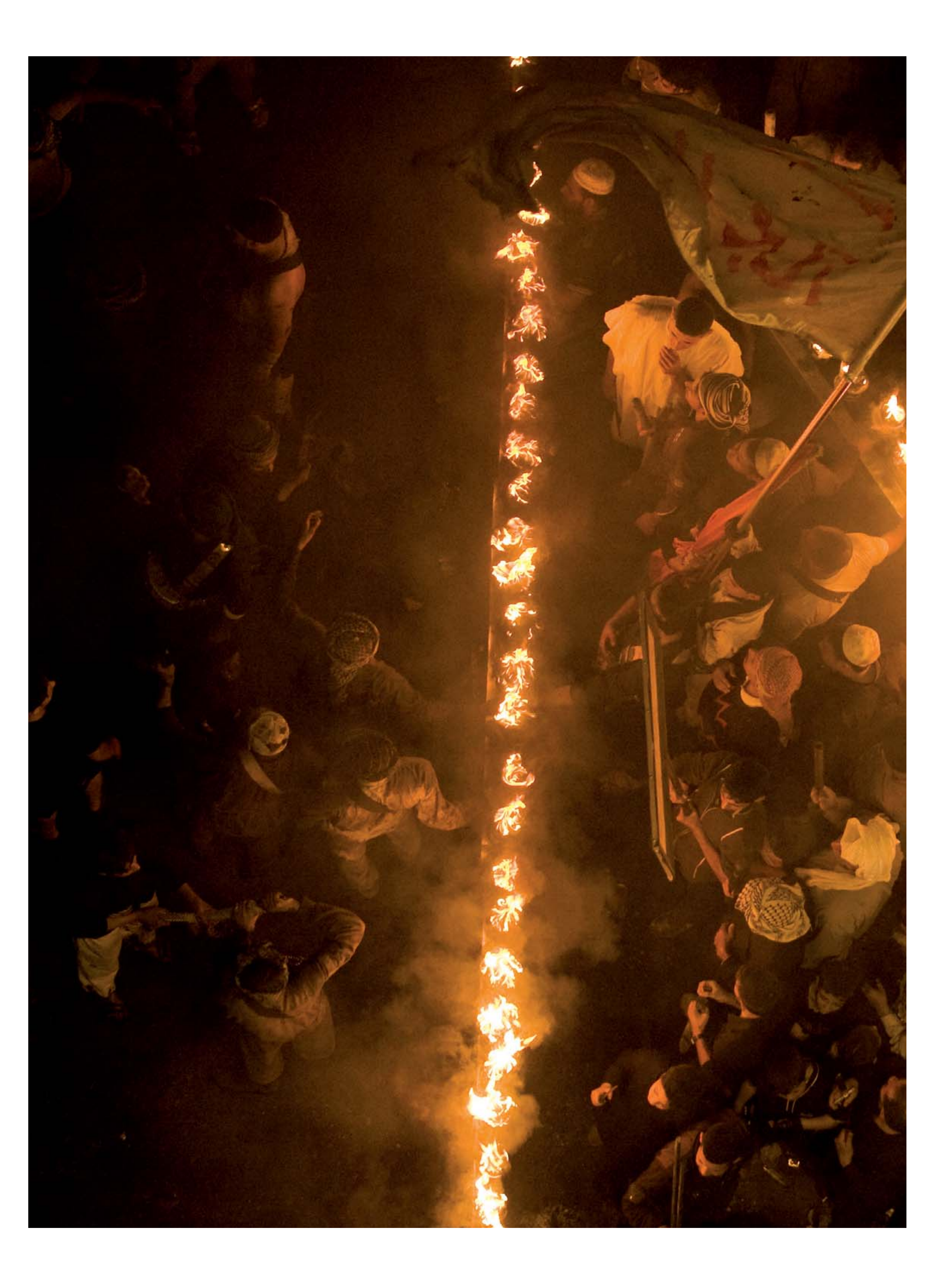


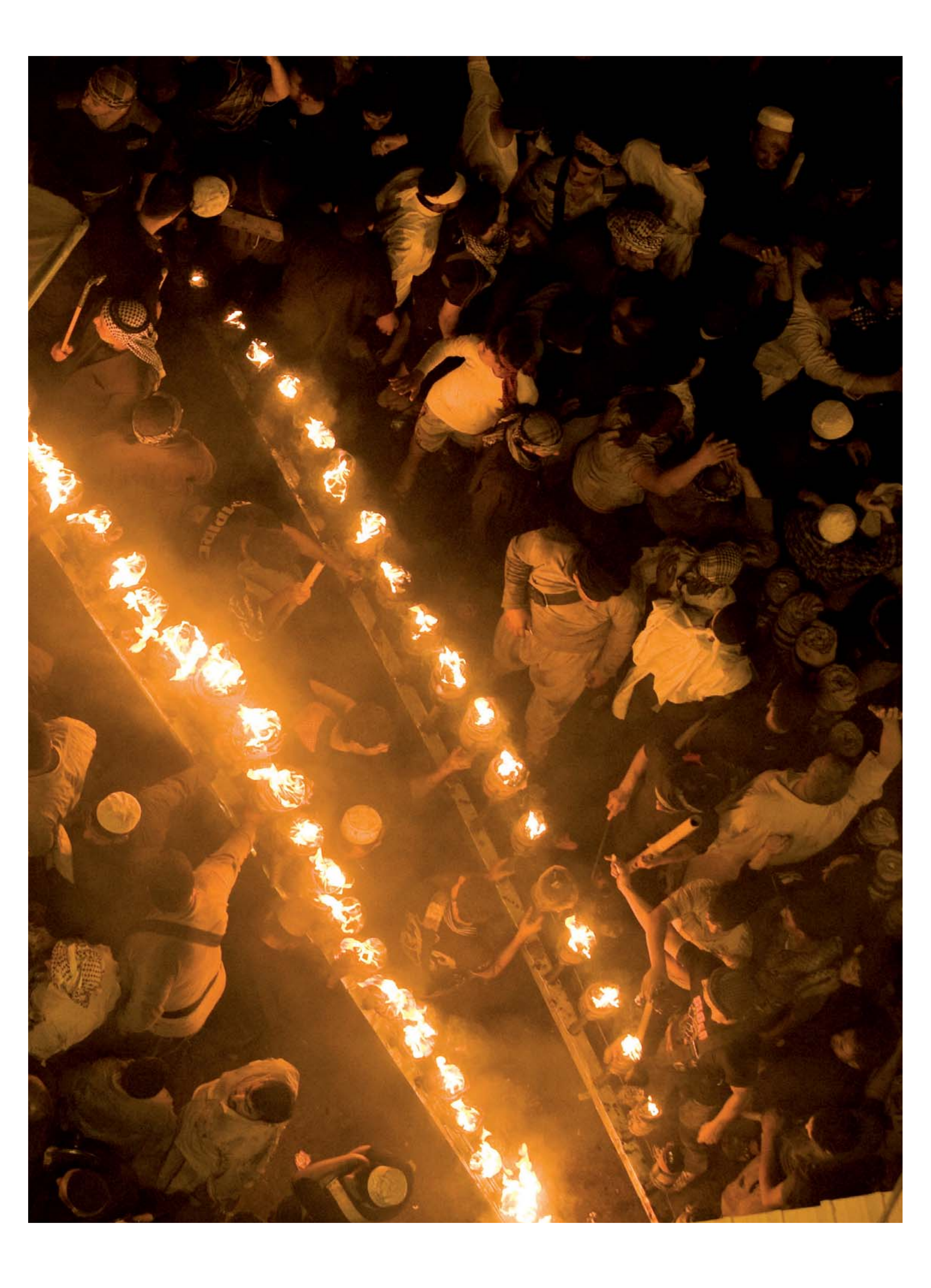
During Muharram, the whole city is buzzing with ritual activities and is saturated with sounds and colours.

The ʻAshura celebrations in Najaf and other major shrine cities have now developed into a ten- to twelve-day period of visual displays, repeated visits to the shrine, sessions of mourning and eulogies (*majalis taʻziya*), and processions of flagellants and torch-bearers, culminating on the tenth day in a huge performance of the *tashabih* or passion play. Well before ʻAshura, as the pilgrims pour into Najaf from all directions, the city and all the streets and squares leading to it are decorated with huge banners in green, black and red, respectively symbolizing the imams and their descendants the *sayyids*, death and mourning, and the blood of martyrdom. The banners bear large calligraphic inscriptions of well-known exhortations such as *Labbayka Ya Husayn* (At your command, O Husayn), *Ya Husayn al-Shahid* (O Husayn the Martyr) and *Ya Husayn ya Mazlum* (O Husayn the Oppressed) – statements that are later repeated during the processions. The shrine of Imam ʻAli and other shrines in Najaf and Kufa are lit with red lights, contributing further drama to the sombre events.



A standard-bearer.







Men carrying huge candelabras light up night processions and animate them with movements.



Night processions are highlights of the commemorations. Fervour grows every evening to reach its apex on the tenth day of Muharram.

Majalis ta'ziya are sometimes still held in private homes, but more commonly they are celebrated in *husayniyyas* – many of which are large tents which have been purpose-built – throughout the city and in the courtyard of the shrine itself. According to Jabar, 'their main function is to relate historical narratives of the Imams, preach their ethical and moral lessons, and evoke grief and sadness over their tragic fate'.[27] The narratives are first recited by a professional orator, called the *rawza-khwan*, who is a *sayyid* or a man of some religious standing, and then chanted by a professional cantor, the *radud*, whose main role is to enhance the passion of the narratives and induce the congregants to weep. Interestingly, some of these *raduds* – such as Basim al-Karbala'i, Salim al-Fartusi and Ja'far al-Musawi – have achieved considerable, even international, fame, as Shi'i recital becomes ever more popular among old and young Iraqis, in Iraq and abroad.

On the tenth day of Muharram, a passion play commemorates the battle of Karbala. Here Imam al-Husayn is represented in the foreground, followed by his half-brother al-'Abbas (to the left).



The performers are usually seated on an elevated platform, sometimes with a short pulpit near its middle, while the congregation, consisting of both men and women in segregated sections, is seated below them in chairs or on the carpeted floor. Coloured banners and posters – some with figural images of the imams – decorate the background. The story told by the reciter is know to all the congregants, as it refers to the epic events of the first ten days of Muharram: al-Husayn's journey with his family and supporters from Mecca to near Karbala; his betrayal by his own supporters in Kufa; the cruelty and treachery of the Umayyad army; the perseverance of the Ahl al-Bayt despite great thirst; the bravery and sacrifice of al-Husayn and his half brother al-'Abbas; the beheading of al-Husayn by Shimr; the taking of the captives to the court of Yazid in Damascus; and the return of the captives with the head of al-Husayn to Karbala. But the poetic and highly dramatic retelling of these episodes never fails to produce the desired effect of weeping, wailing and chest-beating. A *majlis ta'ziya* quite often also includes a group of young men, stripped to the waist, who at some turn in the narrative begin to beat their chests rhythmically or to flagellate their backs with chains, which in turn leads the audience also to beat their chests. Such sessions are held for a few hours on the first week of 'Ashura and become longer on the last three days.

An important public component of the 'Ashura commemorations is the various parades held, often through the Grand Bazaar and in the empty spaces around the shrine. Organized by different tribes, villages, guilds or neighbourhoods in Najaf, these parades are often led by elaborate floats that represent different episodes or persons in the battle of Karbala – the head of al-Husayn, a veiled effigy of Zaynab or an image of al-'Abbas – followed by young





The soldiers of the Umayyad army are dressed in red. The companions of Imam al-Husayn are in white.

chest-beaters and flagellants with chains, accompanied by very loud drumming and chanting. Self-flagellation is practised only by men, and its degree and extent varies considerably according to the individual's age and degree of observance. Some flagellate their backs with bundles of rounded chain that impact the body but do not pierce the skin, while others use whips made of jagged chains (*zanjir*) that do pierce the skin and draw blood. The most extreme form of flagellation is called *tatbir* (cutting the head with a sharp blade in order to draw blood), which is practised by a minority of the participants, although their number has increased in recent years. Although a few *ulama* have spoken against *tatbir*, most religious authorities have condoned all forms of self-flagellation and bleeding as ways to empathize physically with the painful deaths endured by al-Husayn and his supporters during the battle of Karbala.

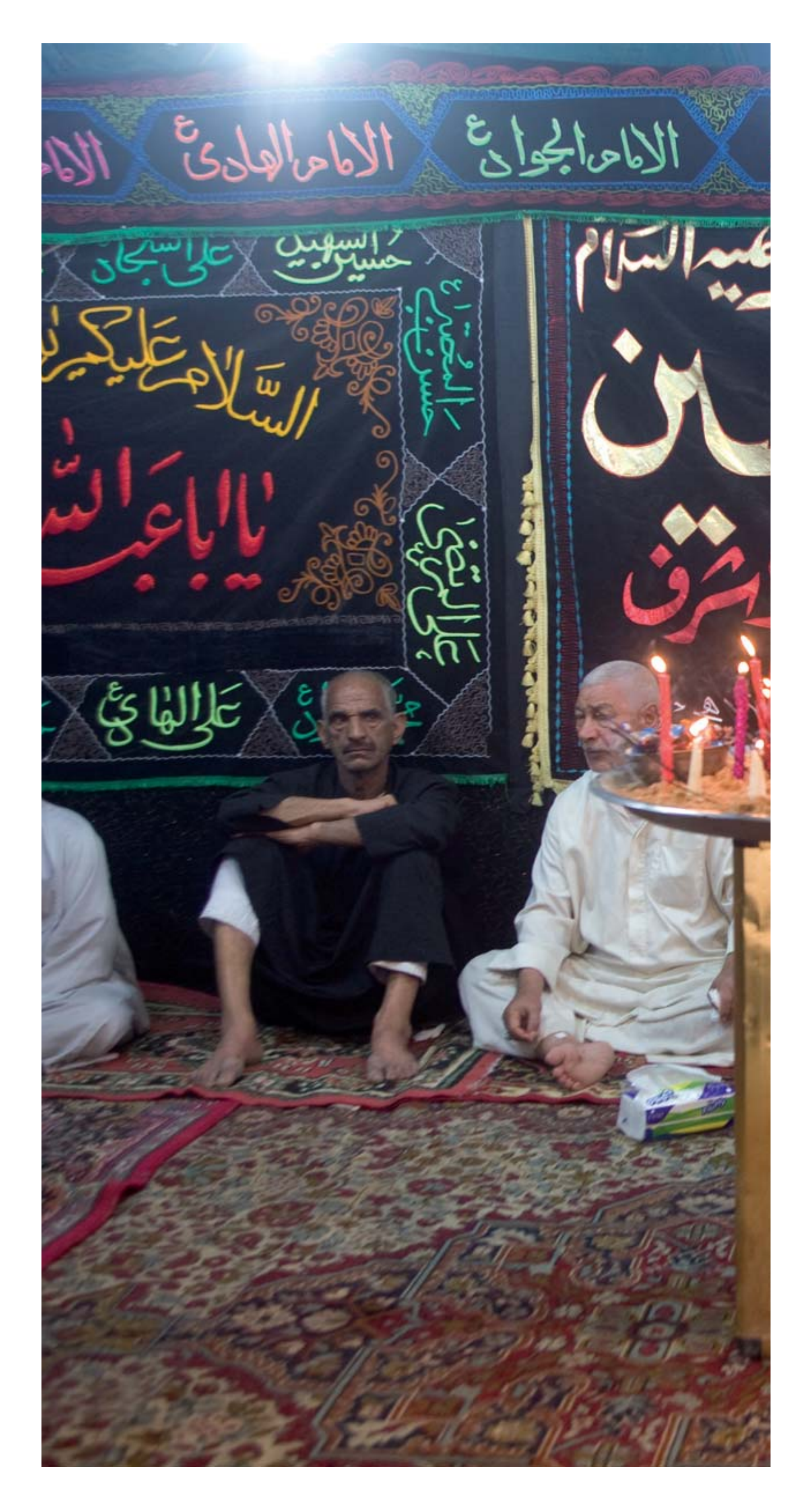
One of the most dramatic of these parades is the *Mawkib al-Masha'il* (Procession of the Torches), which is led by several large candelabras of flaming torches, each carried by one strong man, who turns around in circles, creating a large circle of fire. Accompanied by loud drum and cymbal beaters and flagellants, the fire, heat and clamour of the procession are intended to recall the ferocity of fighting and the burning heat of the desert during the battle of Karbala. Another important procession, the Procession of the Captives (*Mawkib al-Sabaya*), also takes place during 'Ashura, and provides a symbolic representation of the caravan of hostages, mainly women and children, who were captured by the Umayyads during the battle of Kabala and driven to Damascus. Headed by a float with an effigy of Zaynab, sister of Imam al-Husayn, this procession historically started on foot from Wasit, passed through Kufa and ended in Najaf.

On the tenth day of Muharram the festivities culminate in the passion play (*tashbih* or more commonly *tashabih*), the dramatic reenactment of the battle of Karbala. The passion play can be performed in a variety of ways, depending on demographic, financial, cultural and political factors. In the village of al-Hiba, where the author witnessed *tashabih* in 1977, it involved just one horse and a handful of actors with very basic costumes and props. This was just enough to convey the outline of the tragedy, recall the suffering of the audience's religious ancestors, and express grief. It was small, intimate, and real tears were cried by the audience.

Since 2003, however, the *tashabih* have increased dramatically in size, expense and sophistication, particularly in Najaf and Karbala, where preparations are begun for them several weeks before the event. A comprehensive video recording of the *tashabih* at Najaf in 2013 shows an extravagant production, requiring considerable funds, teams of actors and volunteers, many horses and some camels, elaborate costumes, drummers and other musicians, floats, and even some stage sets.



Acting in passion plays is a religious deed. This man embodies one of al-Husayn's companions.



The rituals of Muharram present an opportunity to strengthen social ties in the city's quarters and to receive visitors from outside.

The performance is held in a spacious informal field outside Najaf with elevated seating on two sides for the spectators. The actors and their mounts are colour-coded to make the opposing parties easy to distinguish: green, black and white for the camp of al-Husayn; red and pink for the camp of the Umayyads. The show includes a series of formulaic battles, involving horsemen and foot soldiers, intended to retell in broad, dramatic and populist style the key events of the battle of Karbala: al-Husayn's travel from Mecca; preparations for the battle; the Umayyads burning al-Husayn's camp and preventing him and his army from drinking water; the heroic martyrdoms of al-Husayn's nephew Qasim and his son 'Ali, followed by his half brother al-'Abbas; the tragic beheading of al-Husayn by Shimr; and the aftermath of the battle, with the capture of hostages and their sending off to the court of Yazid in Damascus, and the captives' return to Karbala with the head of al-Husayn. Few words are said – the words have already been spoken over the past ten days and are fully internalized by the spectators – so the action is allowed to speak for itself. The spectators get exactly what they are looking for: displays of honour, pride, courage, nobility and valour from al-Husayn's camp, and the most villainous traits from the other camp. And they respond with jeers and angry shouts at the oppressors, and moans and tears of grief for the massacred Family of the Prophet.

It has been noted that Iraqi Shi'i rituals differ in form and emotional content from their Iranian counterpart, something the authors have themselves witnessed. The Iraqi *tashabih* emphasize actions that symbolize traditional Bedouin or generally Arab virtues, and do not indulge a great deal in poetic exhortations. The Iranian ritual is less concerned with chivalric recreations of battle scenes, and more concerned with the poetic and mystical aspects of the ritual.[28]

The pilgrimage of Arba'in occurs on the twentieth day of Safar, forty days after 'Ashura, and represents a secondary period of mourning for the martyrdom of al-Husayn. Its focal point is the shrine of Imam al-Husayn


الامام الرضا
الامام الكاظم
الامام الصادق
الامام الباقر

in Karbala, upon which great processions converge from all the Shi'i towns and cities of Iraq, the largest by far being the one from Najaf. Historically, the procession from Najaf was organized by merchants from the Grand Bazaar, whose various guilds were recognized at the procession. The Arba'in ceremony is a pan-Shi'i event that serves, among other things, to foster symbolic unity among Shi'a in Iraq and beyond through their physical presence at the shrine of al-Husayn. For most pilgrims the journey begins in Najaf, with condolences to Imam 'Ali, and ends in Karbala, with the expression of grief and the hope for intercession from Imam al-Husayn.

In addition, the Arba'in has a specific significance in Najaf, whereby the grief at the death of Imam al-Husayn is redirected to his father, Imam 'Ali, to whom condolences are offered on that day. These condolences are spoken forcefully and directly, as if the pilgrims are speaking to a living person, which corresponds exactly to the Shi'i belief in the living nature of the imam and his uncorrupted body in the shrine. Unlike the 'Ashura commemoration – with its historical narrative, melodramatic themes and numerous actors – the Arba'in is solely focused on grief, condolence, and the hope for intercession and redemption. Although the Arba'in processions do include repetitive chants, such as *Labbayka ya Husayn!* and *Labbayka ya 'Ali!*, chest-beating and self-flagellation, the event tends to be calmer and more contemplative. The Arba'in provides the pilgrims with a sense of closure, the end of a cycle of grief, as the pilgrims have completed their duty of allegiance and mourning for the martyrdom of al-Husayn and consolations to his father, and can now re-enter their lives with a pure heart and renewed will.

The commemoration of the death of Prophet Muhammad, a specifically Shi'i event, resembles the Arba'in in some respects but has a somewhat lighter emotional impact. During this commemoration, pilgrims visit the shrine of Imam 'Ali in order to offer him condolences for the passing of his cousin and father-in-law. The celebration of this particular festival also has a specific historical and political significance for the Shi'a, for it reinforces the familial and political links between the Prophet Muhammad and 'Ali, emphasizing the Shi'i linkage between Muhammad's prophethood (*nubuwwa*) and 'Ali's legitimate authority (*walaya*) and that of his offspring. There is a similar commemoration for the martyrdom of Imam 'Ali, which is of course a special event for Najaf.

Shi'i rituals, and in particular 'Ashura and Arba'in, therefore have religious, social and political dimensions that have risen and ebbed, largely depending on state approval and the strength of the Shi'i community. Although we have dwelled above on the religious and pious dimensions of the rituals, their social component should not be underestimated, for the prescribed prayers and actions of the pilgrims contribute to a process of social integration, whereby all participants transcend their social and economic differences and join a single community of mourners that is momentarily suspended between past and present. This is perhaps true of all ritual practices, but the intensity of Shi'i rituals, their theatrical pacing, and their projection of history into the present moment all contribute toward fusing the individual into a community of 'redemptive suffering'.[29]

In modern times, Shi'i rituals have sometimes been directed towards political ends, whereby the reciters or the chanters – as directed by larger forces – agitate the crowds by metaphorically linking the oppression and suffering of al-Husayn with their own grievances or sense of oppression, or the charismatic powers of 'Ali with a call for action. Such messages can also be conveyed by the wording of banners carried in processions or during the *tashabih*. Although most effectively utilized in the 1979 Iranian revolution, the practice of 'double metaphors' was also used in Iraq in the 1991 rebellions against the Ba'athist regime. The politicization of Shi'i rituals seems to have fallen out of practice in the last few years.

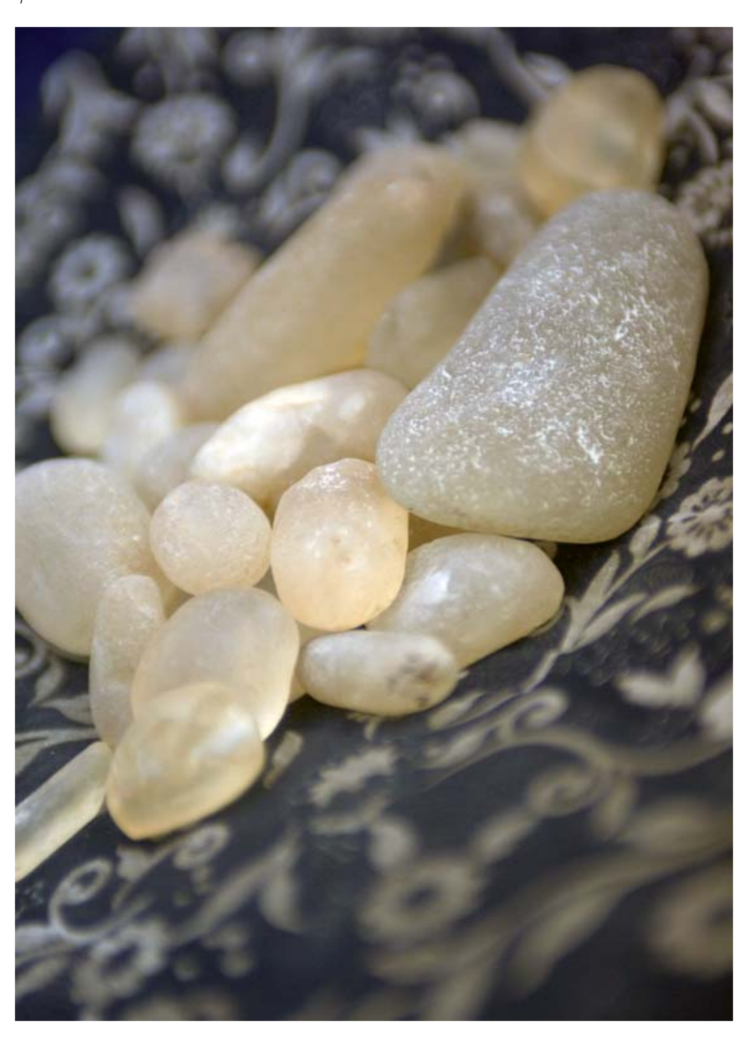
The pearls of Najaf

The commonest ones are transparent, sometimes with filaments or black specks inside them. They are either sold singly or set in necklaces, making them look like raindrops. However, most often they are set in rings. These stones, called pearls of Najaf (durr al-Najaf)*, in fact a type of rock crystal or other kind of quartz, are found in the desert near Najaf or Kufa, and they were originally drops of water that have crystallized in the sand. They are usually cheap enough – set in a ring they cost around US$ 12 – for every pilgrim visiting the shrine of 'Ali to take one away and benefit from its special qualities. It is said that God planned it that way.*

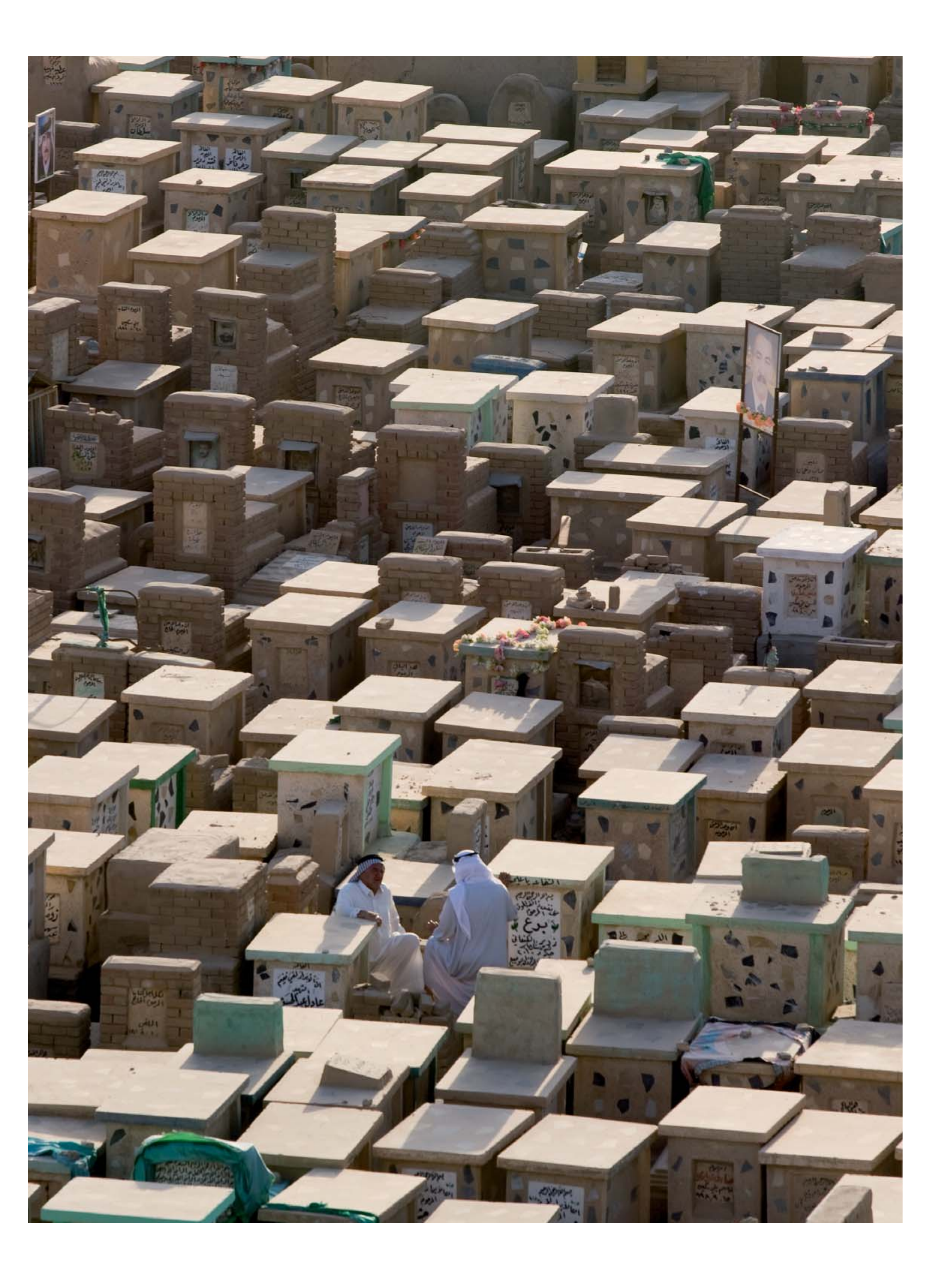
Some of the stones are more expensive because of their rarity, however, and in the market in Najaf there is a huge variety on display, including honey-coloured, orange-tinted, yellow, rose, mauve, blue and even black ones. According to the merchants, these Najaf pearls come in some 350 different shades. Some of the more commonly available ones take their names from their colours – nafti, *meaning 'petrol', for the brown-coloured stones, for example, or* husayni *for those containing red flecks, so called because according to a popular saying they are coloured with the blood of al-Husayn, the imam martyred at Karbala. There are also the* sha'r, *or 'hair', stones that contain thread-like filaments.*

The stones are washed and then exposed to the sun in order to give them their brilliance. The raw stones are then cut and polished in a three-step process since 'it is only during the third stage that the sun shines,' as one artisan in a workshop on the first floor of the souk put it.

Najaf pearls have special qualities. According to one tradition attributed to Ja'far al-Sadiq, the sixth imam, looking at them makes the hearts of believers happier and cures eye problems. According to another tradition, a man who gazes at a Najaf pearl set into a ring receives the same kind of divine reward that he would have received had he visited a shrine or gone on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Finally, it is also said that the pearls are linked to the marriage of the Imam 'Ali to Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. On that day, it is said that it rained Najaf pearls.



Uncut Najaf pearls.





The last journey

Burial and visitation at Wadi al-Salam

Tombs are very dense in the old part of the cemetery, where it is common to see undertakers striking up a conversation.

During a burial ceremony, undertakers lower a body wrapped in a white cotton shroud (kafan) *into a hole. Underground, the body will be laid on the right side with the face towards Mecca following the Islamic tradition.*



Many tombs are embellished with portraits of the deceased, a feature typical of Shi'i funerary art.

An early-morning view of Wadi al-Salam cemetery from the sixth level of an adjacent building is like no other in the world. A seemingly endless repetition of rectangular tombs of various sizes, punctuated by earthen or blue-tiled domes, stretches across the horizon: westward, where the cemetery dips down and nearly vanishes into the blue waters of Bahr al-Najaf; and eastward, where the newer part of the cemetery continues grid-like halfway to Kufa. Possibly the largest cemetery in the world, the Wadi al-Salam, along with the shrine of Imam 'Ali and the Great Mosque of Kufa, forms the third pole of sanctity in the Najaf–Kufa region.

Burial in Najaf dates back in documented history to the Sassanian and Parthian times, and in 'sacred history' to the earliest prophets, if not to the beginning of creation. Such burial sites are quite common in ancient Mesopotamian cities, where the accumulation of tombs has created mounds on the outskirts of these early settlements. Indeed, long before the rise of Najaf as a permanent city, its outskirts and hills had been used as burial sites for the residents of Hira and later Kufa, and some of these informal cemeteries survived until recently. These cemeteries include, but are not restricted to, the Wadi al-Salam cemetery, which is the main subject of this chapter.

In addition to historical precedence, there are at least two main factors that have contributed to the expansion of cemeteries around Najaf, and specifically in Wadi al-Salam. First, Shi'ism has developed a somewhat more permissive attitude than Sunnism with regard to the commemoration of the dead and the erection of mausoleums, although regional customs also play an important part. This is certainly true for the tombs of Ahl al-Bayt and their various descendants and associates, but it seems to have expanded, at a much more modest level, to notable religious figures and to common people as well. More importantly, burial in Najaf is considered especially meritorious because of the proximity to Imam 'Ali,



Reading passages from the Qur'an for the soul of the deceased is considered a highly meritorious practice.

who not only radiates bliss but is also believed to intercede on behalf of the deceased during the passage of their soul from the here to the hereafter. Numerous *hadiths* attest to the widely accepted belief among Shi'is of Imam 'Ali's power of intercession on behalf of believers: both right after death, when his intercession could shorten the suffering of the grave (*'athab al-qabr*), and on the Day of Resurrection, when his intercession could shrink the period (*barzakh*) between death and resurrection.[30]

This accounts for the massive number of burials in Wadi al-Salam and for the transportation to it of corpses across great distances, an extremely important phenomenon with religious, political and economic dimensions. As early as the beginning of the fourteenth/twentieth century, as many as 20,000 corpses were being brought annually for burial in Najaf, primarily from Iran, with a smaller percentage from the Indian subcontinent and the Ottoman Empire.





A view of Wadi al-Salam from the sixth level of an adjacent building. The cemetery extends westward along Bahr al-Najaf and northward as far as the eye can see.



The courtyard of the mausoleum of Imam al-Mahdi in Wadi al-Salam.



The number has increased today to maybe up to 100,000 corpses annually, arriving on land and by plane from Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and Yemen.

Tombs in the cemetery are divided by ethnicity, clan, extended family or town of origin. This is a section where Iranians are buried. Names and places of origin, and sometimes dates of burial, are recorded on slabs.

The transportation of corpses to Najaf was such an important and lucrative trade in the late thirteenth/nineteenth and early fourteenth/twentieth centuries that *fatwas* were issued to regulate the state of preservation of the corpses that were being transported, and commercial agreements were drafted to control the price of transport and custom tariffs.[31] In addition to the revenue accrued from transportation and tariffs, the burial trade today creates a significant source of revenue for sellers of burial plots, tomb-builders, grave-diggers, corpse-preparers, shroud-makers, shrine servants and chanters. A substantial service sector has now grown up within and on the outskirts of Wadi al-Salam, including



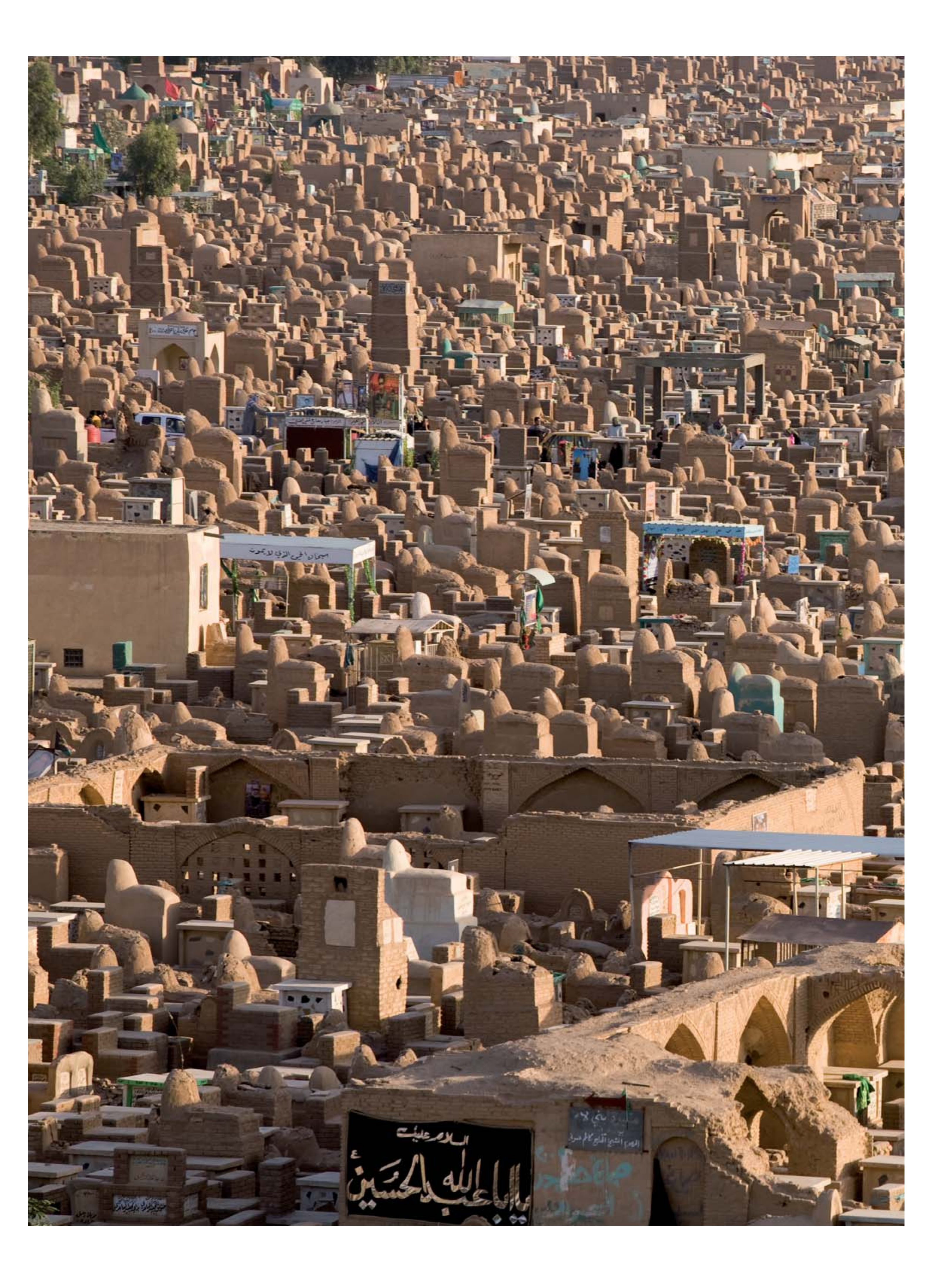
In the newer part of the cemetery, an intersection is marked
with numerous signs, with or without pictures,
that indicate the place of or directions to a particular lot.

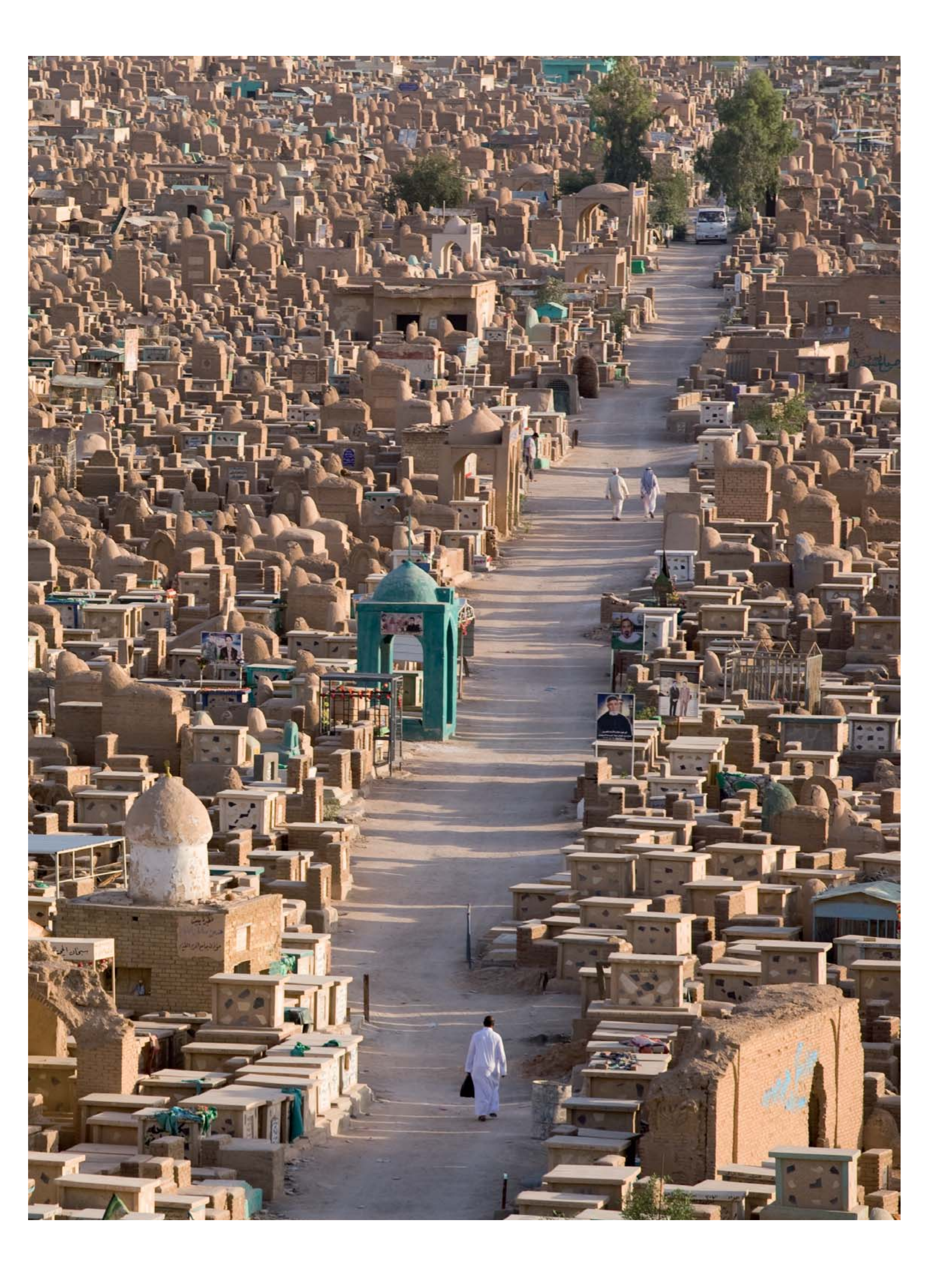


transportation, signage, food, drink, souvenirs and religious paraphernalia. Overall, the burial trade is a huge industry with deep historical roots and considerable growth potential.

Until quite recently, those wishing to be buried in Najaf had other choices than the Wadi al-Salam cemetery, including the courtyard of the shrine of Imam ʻAli and many cemeteries that bordered Najaf to the north-east and extended along the road linking it with Kufa. As was mentioned in Chapter 3, the courtyard of the shrine once contained the tombs of various princes, sultans and their wives, but these tombs were paved over in 1791 and several times since. Other cemeteries, clearly shown in early aerial photographs of Najaf, were located at various spots east and north of Najaf, particularly along the road linking it with Kufa. These cemeteries were removed at different stages during the expansion of Najaf in the second half of the fourteenth/twentieth century, in order to make way for paved roads, parking lots, parks, government buildings and private residences.

Burial in Najaf has now become restricted to the Wadi al-Salam cemetery, whose size has multiplied exponentially over the past thirty years, from 196 hectares in 1973 to over 1,000 hectares in 2014. Its extent is now determined by a low concrete wall with several gates. The cemetery has an irregular, roughly rectangular shape that extends generally from south-west to north-east. This area is divided into the old cemetery at the south-west, overlooking the Bahr al-Najaf, and the new cemetery to the north-east, extending well past the limits of the walled city. Possibly as many as 5 million corpses are buried in it, making it one of the largest cemeteries in the world, in terms of both area and number of tombs.[32]


السلام عليك
يا ابا عبد الله الحسين





Turbas *for sale in the cemetery. The Shi'a prostrate their forehead upon these tablets, usually made of clay from Karbala, during prayer.*

◤ *A seemingly endless repetition of rectangular tombs of various sizes, punctuated by earthen or blue-tiled domes, stretches towards the horizon.*



The cemetery is a hub of commercial activities serving daily mourners and visitors who come from the whole Shi'i world. Here a ring-seller.



Young man driving a motorcycle with a cart attached for transporting visitors in Wadi al-Salam.



Women and men attending a burial ceremony in Wadi al-Salam.

The huge area of the cemetery is traversed by as many as forty-two roads, of which seventeen are paved, and these are regularly used by small three-wheeled cars which take visitors to different parts of the cemetery. Generally speaking the old cemetery, with its wavy terrain and great accumulation of tombs, has a rather organic organization in clusters, whereas in the new cemetery tombs or tomb groups follow a strictly gridded plan. Tombs in both parts of the cemetery are divided, much as was done in early Islamic cities, by ethnicity, clan, extended family or town of origin. For example, the Indians, Lebanese and Gulf Arabs have more or less separate burial areas. Members of different clans or extended families, and those coming from a specific village, often choose to buy adjacent plots that are identified by their name. Indeed, every street intersection in the cemetery is marked by numerous signs, with or without pictures, that indicate the place of or directions to a particular plot.



Tombs are made in different fashions and designs. In this section, they recall the steps of Assyrian reliefs. Height is meant to make tombs more recognizable by visiting family members.



A typical burial plot for an extended family at Wadi al-Salam covers 8 sq.m, which allows for eight or nine tombs. A system of burial in crypts (*sirdab*), 2 to 4 m deep, has been developed, in which bodies are interred at the bottom and at three or four levels in cavities dug into the walls of the crypt. This intensive system of burial, which has a long history in the ancient world, is made possible by the dry and reasonably compact subsoil at Wadi al-Salam, which makes it possible to dig down several metres with simple tools. These tombs conform to Muslim burial requirements, both in their minimum depth and in the proper orientation and placement of the corpse, which must be laid flat on its right side, with the face of the deceased oriented towards Mecca.

Islamic burials follow specific rites and rituals, which are largely followed by Shi'ism, but with a few variations. The time between death and burial must be quite short, no longer than a day, although corpses buried elsewhere can be moved to Najaf at a later time. During this short time the body must be ritually washed; wrapped in a white cotton shroud (*kafan*); carried in a casket to a mosque for a specific ritual prayer (*salat al-jinaza*); taken to the cemetery, where a burial place will already have been prepared; and lowered into the burial place without the casket. Some of these rituals – such as washing and wrapping the body and preparing the tomb – are performed by professionals, sometimes with the help of family members. The prayer, procession and burial tend to be communal efforts that may include a large number of participants, depending on the importance of the deceased or the size of his clan.

In addition to these common Muslim rituals Shi'ism, as practised today in Iraq, makes greater allowance for mourning, visitation and the building of tomb memorials,



such as large and elaborate tombstones or even domed mausoleums. Unlike the austerity and restraint that marked the Sunni burials the author has witnessed, Shi'i burials are generally characterized by much longer qur'anic and *hadith* recitations, chanted by a *radud*, that end with an evocation of the suffering and martyrdom of the imams. The chanting, which is accompanied by weeping and light chest-beating by the congregation, recalls the feeling of a *majlis ta'ziya*, which is a way of linking the death of the individual with the mercy of the imams. The rather elaborate forms of the burials and the use of photographs of the dead, sometimes with paintings of the imams, all serve to enhance the pathos of the experience and the intercession of the imams.

The cemetery can be visited at all times of the day and all days of the week, but residents of Najaf generally make their visits on Fridays and during Ramadan, in addition to the various holy days of the Shi'i calendar. *Laylat al-Qadr* (the Night of Power or Destiny), which falls between the twenty-third and twenty-seventh day of Ramadan, is considered especially propitious for visiting the dead.

In addition to being one of the largest cemeteries in the world, Wadi al-Salam boasts a long sacred history, which is documented by a large number of shrines of prophets, imams and other pious figures. Adam, Noah, Ehud and Salih, qur'anic prophets who paved the way for Islam, all have shrines in Wadi al-Salam. The double shrine of Ehud and Salih, located at the southern edge of the cemetery, is visited frequently, since these two prophets are especially venerated for their perseverance in the face of great hardships, an allegory for the continuity of Shi'ism. Their shrine has exactly the same form as is used for minor members of Ahl al-Bayt, a small domed square with a modest *shubbak*.



The most outlying section of the cemetery towards the north-west. Family burial plots of a standard 8 sq m are marked on the ground and waiting to be used.



The burial is followed by qur'anic and hadith *recitations, chanted by a* radud, *and ends with an evocation of the suffering and martyrdom of the imams.*

Larger and more frequently visited are the shrines associated with a number of imams, including Safi Safa, 'Ali, Zayn al-'Abidin, Ja'far al-Sadiq and al-Mahdi. The shrines of al-Mahdi and Ja'far al-Sadiq, which are almost adjacent to one another, are located at the continuation of al-Tusi Street where it meets the cemetery. It is believed that Ja'far al-Sadiq used the location of the current shrine for a temporary residence when he visited his grandfather, Imam 'Ali. As for the shrine of Imam al-Mahdi, it once contained a rock inscribed with his name, but this vanished during a recent rebuilding. Both shrines have been rebuilt in recent years.

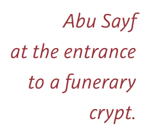
Possibly the most visited mausoleum in Wadi al-Salam is that of Sayyid Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, an important thinker and cleric, who was murdered along with two of his sons, Mu'mil and Mustafa, in 1999, most likely by Saddam Husayn's forces. The mausoleum, which was built recently, consists of a dome that shelters the burials of Sadiq al-Sadr and his sons, and a prayer hall connected with it. Unlike the shrines of imams, this mausoleum contains figurative representations of the deceased, one of which shows him reading from religious books he authored, while a large photograph in the prayer hall shows him delivering a sermon to a congregation. This mausoleum represents a new trend that aims to present a more contemporary image of Wadi al-Salam and to link it politically with the tragic events of the late fourteenth/twentieth century.

Wadi al-Salam and Abu Sayf's family heritage

The huge size of Wadi al-Salam does not worry Abu Sayf, who knows its every byway and above all its depths. 'The crypts (sirdab) *are far larger than the surface area would have you believe,' he says. 'Each one can hold up to fifty bodies.' Every Najafi family has a crypt of 50 m2 (5 m × 10 m) allocated to it by the municipal council, and each of these crypts can hold thirty bodies. Some non-Iraqi families also have crypts at Wadi al-Salam, or they can buy one big enough to hold ten people for around IQD 4 million (about US$3,400). Part of the cemetery holds plots reserved for foreigners, and Shi'a are buried there along with Sunni Muslims, Christians and Sabeans. 'Investigations of some sample areas have suggested that the cemetery contains around 5 million corpses, but it is not possible to be precise about such a large area,' Abu Sayf comments.*

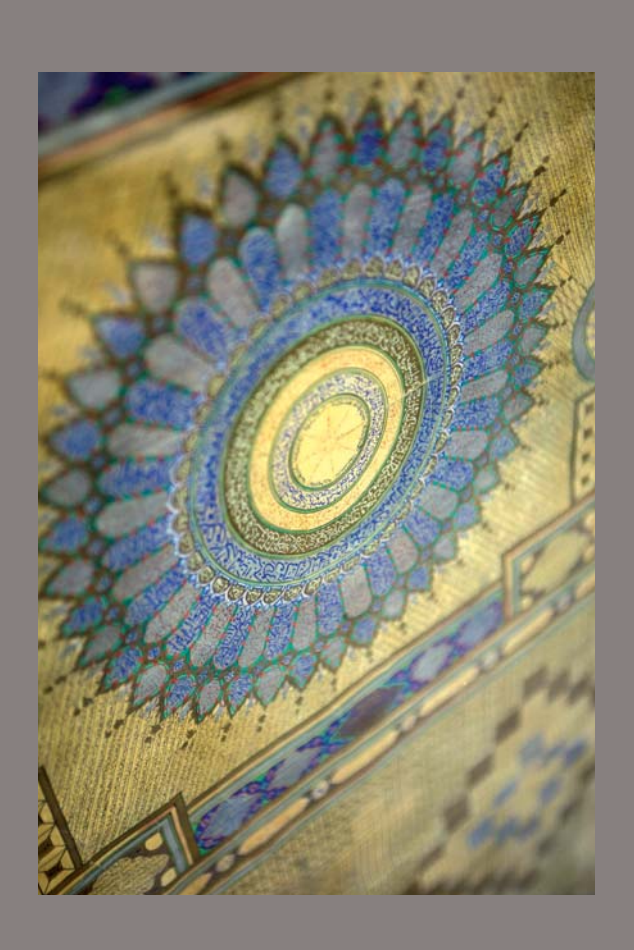
Najah Abu Saiba, known as 'Abu Sayf', is one of the undertakers who conduct the 200 burials a day that take place at Wadi al-Salam. A graduate from the United Kingdom and a previous employee of the University of Kufa, he did not choose his present line of work by chance. Instead, Abu Sayf's knowledge of the cemetery and his expertise in the procedures and Islamic rulings that should be followed during funerals are all part of his family heritage. The Abu Saiba family has sixteen undertaker agencies in Wadi al-Salam, and they are one of the religious families in the city that have traditionally followed this profession.

According to family history, an ancestor came from the Hijaz during the Ottoman period and settled at the shrines of al-Mahdi and Ja'far al-Sadiq where he worked as a servant. He also often used to go to the shrine of Imam 'Ali and watch how the burials were taking place. Following a dream in which he saw Imam 'Ali himself, he volunteered to work in the funerary business. The trade has been in the family ever since, and Abu Sayf learned it from his father. While his own sons have chosen to go to university instead, Abu Sayf's nephew will probably follow in the family tradition.



Abu Sayf at the entrance to a funerary crypt.





Conclusion

In visiting Najaf during the past two years and while writing this book, the authors have become increasingly aware of what makes Najaf unique, and it is their hope that they have passed on to the reader some of their appreciation of its distinctive qualities. The book has viewed Najaf through the multiple lenses of history, architecture, ritual and knowledge, and we hope it has provided lay readers with some insights into these various aspects of the city, and perhaps whetted their appetite for further reading. In this brief conclusion, we would like to pull together these insights and weave them into a tapestry that displays Najaf's essential totality, its place in the life of its inhabitants and visitors, and its vision for the future.

Once secondary to Kufa – in fact little more than a village near a cemetery – Najaf now encompasses Kufa and extends several kilometres in the direction of Karbala. Despite all its attractions – shrine, *hawza* and *marja'iyya*, and Wadi al-Salam – the road to Najaf's prosperity was not paved with gold. There were hard times – decades of warfare, centuries of drought – and epochs when its population dwindled to less than 1,000 inhabitants. It has undergone marginalization and neglect, but is now in the ascendant. Its *hawza* has regained its historical prominence and its *marja'*s are influential and possessed of a modern outlook, determined to deal with present conditions and future challenges while closely guarding their centuries of inherited knowledge.

These exceptional historical, theological, educational and architectural dimensions conjoin to make Najaf a unique city with a distinct urban character. Few other cities impress their inhabitants and visitors with such a vivid personality as Najaf, and few others prescribe and circumscribe their lives from birth to death and beyond.

This book has dealt more with Najaf's historical and traditional aspects than with its modern sectors, and has inevitably focused more on its traditional religious and educational practices than on its modern universities and economic institutions. Time and the limitations of the book did not permit us to deal adequately with modern Najaf. But our visits to the universities of Najaf and Kufa, and our conversations with Najafi intellectual leaders, brief as they were, clearly demonstrated to us their attachment to their city and their progressive outlook.

As we write, Najaf has embarked on perhaps the largest development project in its long history. As noted above, the shrine is being expanded from its current western perimeter location all the way to the western limits of the old city, a massive expansion that will more than triple the usable areas for visitation, prayer, learning and various functional needs. Beyond this axis, modern hotels and restaurants with a commanding view of Bahr al-Najaf are being built, while at least one massive shopping mall is near completion. The people of Najaf can therefore view their future with great optimism, a future vision that is balanced by great pride in their history, love of knowledge, and deep attachment to the memory and example of Imam 'Ali.

Afterword

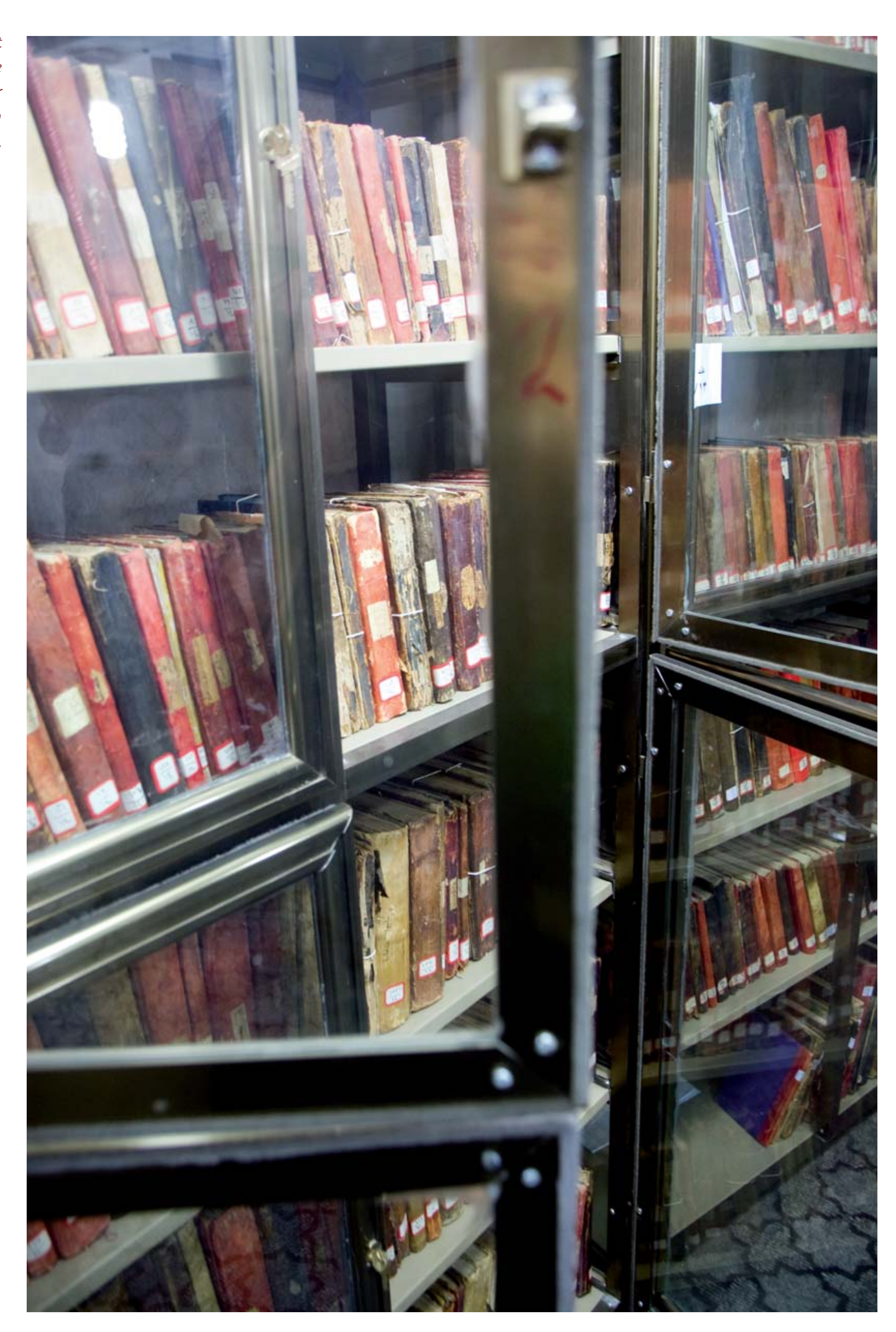
A personal journey through Najaf's libraries and manuscript collections

For the past fifteen years, I have taught book and manuscript conservation in my home town of Palermo, Sicily, and delivered training to librarians and conservators in some of the richest collections of Oriental manuscripts and rare books in Yemen, Uzbekistan, Ethiopia, Egypt and elsewhere. It was not without excitement and a degree of apprehension that, at the request of UNESCO, I undertook a mission to Najaf in December 2012 to assess the conservation conditions of the collections in the city's libraries. As Iraq had been mostly inaccessible to foreigners between the late 1970s and 2003, little was known of the situation of these collections, which were however famous among international specialists in Islamic manuscripts.

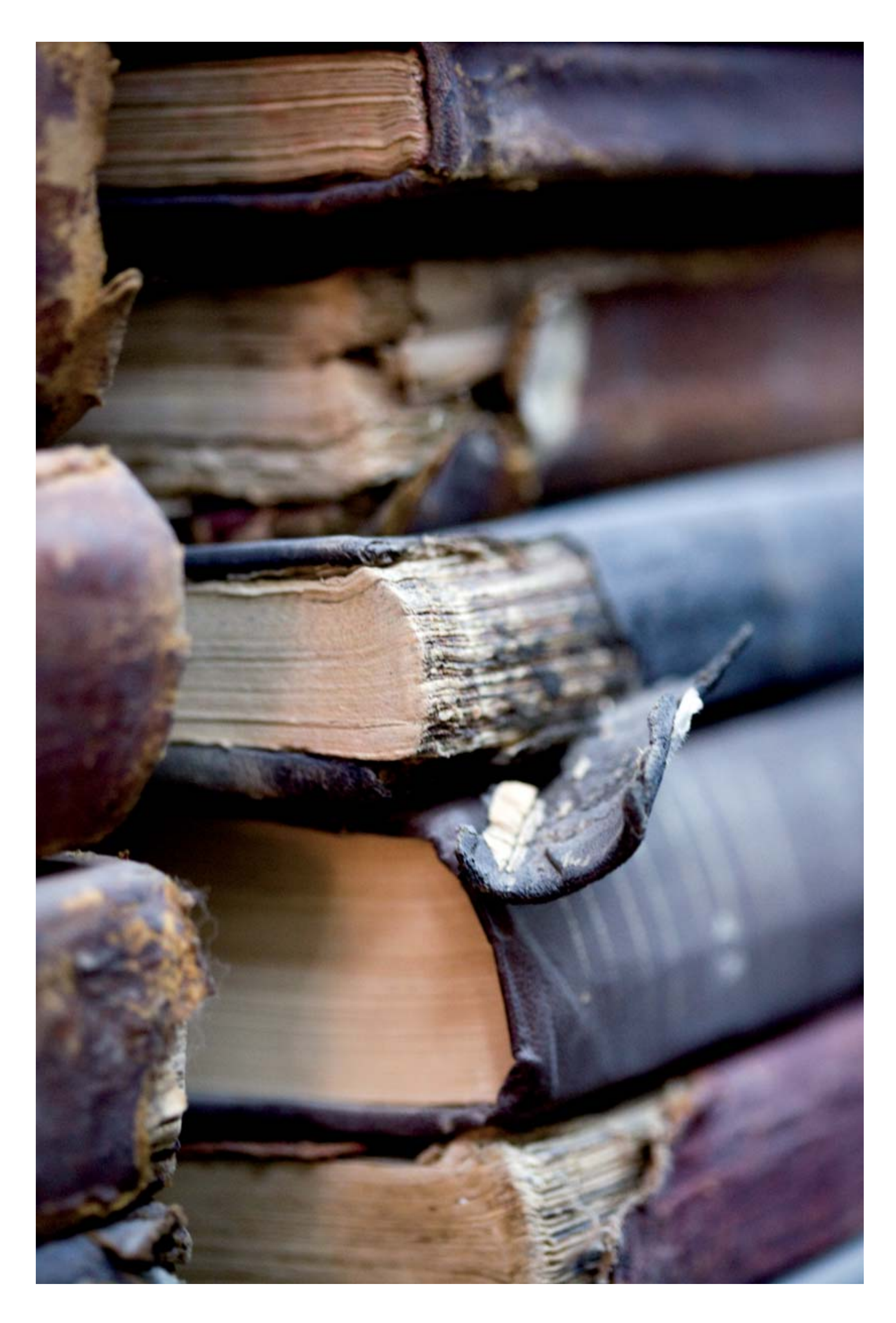
During my initial ten-day stay I visited about twenty libraries, most of them privately owned. In most cases, the libraries were created by learned men who authored books, and used to copy and buy the works they needed for their own studies, therefore increasing the wealth of their collections. Many of these men travelled the world to obtain written copies of important manuscripts from Hijaz, Iran, Turkey or India, and photographic reproductions of other rare Arabic, Persian or Ottoman manuscripts preserved in the national libraries of Cairo, London and Paris, at the Chester Beatty library of Dublin, or other such places. Collections were passed on to the next generations, and became the patrimony of families. Until the nineteenth century CE, collections consisted mostly of manuscripts, but they were eventually enriched with printed books, periodicals, and most recently electronic publications.

What astonished me most was the wealth of printed books and the public vocation of all these libraries, open to everyone. I was not ready to find hundreds of thousands of books, besides periodicals, newspapers, microfilms, photocopies and books in digital format. Everything was catalogued and accessible, ready to serve scholars, students and researchers in buildings that sometimes were adapted but had often been built for their purpose. There were reading rooms for men and women, cataloguers' offices, computers, reproduction services and even small elevators to safely bring the books from the shelves on the highest galleries to the ground-floor reading rooms. I also found the largest libraries equipped with conservation laboratories. Despite the questionable old practice of regular rebinding of texts, which causes the loss of original, very important, bookbindings, and a general tendency to overlook preventive actions in conservation, I witnessed an extreme care towards and interest in these volumes.

The situation becomes even more impressive when we consider specifically the manuscripts. Normally, even if they are regarded as extremely important items, very few libraries in the world have the time and expertise to properly catalogue their manuscript collections. This does not appear to be the case in Najaf, where all the libraries I visited claimed to have fully catalogued their manuscript collection a long time ago. However, according to Dr Mohammed Zwayn, an expert in the history of the Najaf libraries, out of an estimated 60,000 manuscript titles, only a third are recorded on library catalogues because many are owned by small private collections with limited resources. To give an idea of the importance of Najaf's collection, Dr Zwayn takes the example of the oldest manuscripts of the Qur'an, dating from the first five centuries of Islam, of which about a hundred are scattered all over the world. Iraq counts eighteen of these, and Najaf alone is home to nine, some of which are among the oldest surviving copies.



Manuscript safe storage at the Amir al-Mu'minin Library.





Periodicals cataloguing room at the Amir al-Mu'minin Library.

Many libraries all over Iraq have experienced tremendous challenges and suffered irreplaceable losses during the Saddam Husayn period. In Najaf, libraries were closed and at times burned; collections were confiscated; scholars were hunted; and printing and publishing was frozen. Under the embargo, people smuggled scanners into their libraries to produce backup copies of their rare books and manuscripts for fear of their confiscation or destruction. Others were making two photocopies of their manuscripts, one to keep in the library, the other one offsite for extra security, a fundamental principle highly recommended worldwide but often disregarded even in the most important libraries.

After the 2003 CE change of regime, Najaf experienced a resurgence of libraries and publishing activities unparalleled in Iraq. Old libraries were reopened and expanded, and new ones were created. Furthermore,



Folio from an early Qur'an on parchment in Kufic script, believed to be written by the hand of Imam 'Ali. Amir al-Mu'minin Library.

scholars who had left the city have come back, bringing their collections of books along with them. There are over forty libraries in Najaf today, some attached to religious, cultural and educational institutions, others government-owned like the one at the University of Kufa, but many more privately held. I can only mention some of the jewels that I had the privilege to visit during my first and subsequent visits to Najaf.

The library of the shrine of Imam 'Ali (*al-Maktaba al-'Alawiyya*) was founded in the tenth century CE and has since been continuously endowed by princes, sultans, wealthy benefactors and the gift of private collections. It contains in excess of 400,000 volumes in various languages, and holds thousands of manuscripts, among which are over 400 of the rarest and most beautiful Qur'ans with calligraphy and illumination. The collection is today too large to be housed in the shrine or receive visitors, and will be moved into new premises in the extension of the shrine that is now under construction.

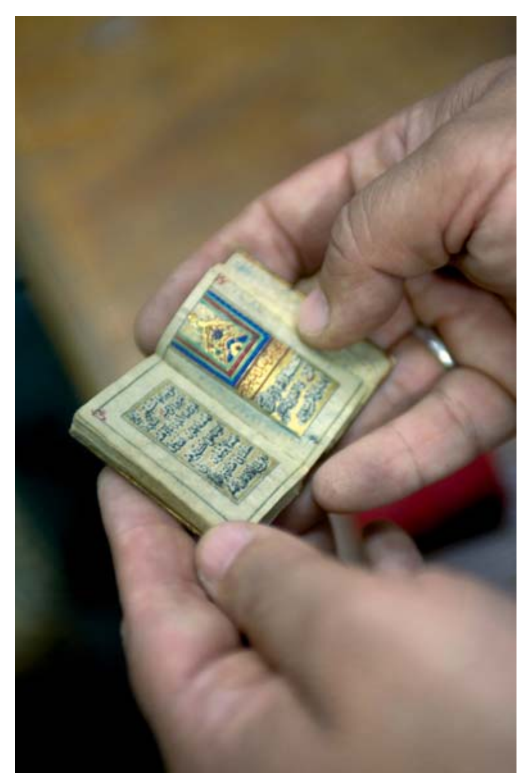
The Imam Amir al-Mu'minin Library was founded in 1953 CE by Shaykh 'Abd al-Husayn al-Amini after he toured many Arab and Muslim countries collecting books and manuscripts. Today this collection has become one of Iraq's leading libraries thanks to the efforts of its custodians. It has grown from fewer than 15,000 titles at its foundation to more than 100,000 printed books, in addition to periodicals, archives, donated collections and 5,000 manuscripts.

The Al Kashif al-Ghita' Public Library grew out the collection of Shaykh 'Ali Al Kashif al-Ghita', which his son, Shaykh Muhammad Husayn, turned into an independent institution after his father's death in 1931 CE. The library, still owned by the same family, holds 15,000 printed books and about 2,000 manuscripts, and continues its acquisitions of new titles and other private collections. It also contains an archive department. In 2007 CE the library was entirely rebuilt and expanded over five storeys thanks to a grant from Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani.

The Imam al-Hakim Public Library, founded in 1957 CE by Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim al-Tabatabai, holds in excess of 45,000 items – including valuable encyclopaedias – in various languages such as Arabic, Urdu, Persian, English, French, Italian, Spanish, Turkish and Swahili. The manuscripts division includes about 4,000 volumes for more than 6,000 titles covering various branches of knowledge, in addition to 1,000 photocopied manuscripts.

Two illuminated miniature manuscripts of the Qur'an on burnished paper. Amir al-Mu'minin Library.





The Abu Sa'ida Documentary Library, attached to a scholarly and cultural institution, was founded by Sayyid Husayn Abu Sa'ida al-Musawi in 1973 CE. It originated from the founder's interest in the history of local families, and preserves thousands of documents, deeds, wills, records, photographs and newspapers collected over decades and nowadays given by people who entrust their family archives to the institution. It also keeps augmenting its holdings by the acquisition of copies from many important collections in the Middle East, particularly the Ottoman archive in Istanbul, therefore enabling genealogical research particularly for people who need to trace their family connection to Najaf.

The Najaf Central Library was established as the municipal library in 1936, and is still housed in a pleasant building surrounded by a garden outside the old town where it was moved in the early 1960s CE. Unfortunately this library suffered the most from the past twenty turbulent years, and today has few holdings. It has been managed since 1974 by Ms Rawa Sumaysim, an active and committed director who is progressively and painstakingly bringing the library back to life. The institution hosts a children library with books and toys, and at the same time preserves a number of very rare, possibly unique, local newspapers dating back to the 1930s CE.

With reason, Najafis are proud of their library heritage, and are eager to allow access by foreign visitors and scholars, and to benefit from international attention. Thanks to the Iraqi Ministry of Culture, the UNESCO Office for Iraq, the local authorities and all the individuals who did not spare any effort to make this project successful, we were able in 2013 to organize three intensive training sessions on the preservation and preventive conservation of books and manuscripts, hosted by the Amir al-Mu'minin Library. Twenty-five librarians from Najaf, Karbala and Baghdad attended the course and improved their knowledge on several aspects of book preservation. State-of-the-art materials and equipment were brought to the country to be used during the training and eventually distributed among the various libraries whose employees joined the course, so that they can benefit their collections, even if only on a small scale. This was a modest but important first step towards reintegrating the libraries and librarians of Najaf and Iraq into international professional networks after decades of isolation.

Marco Di Bella
UNESCO expert in book and manuscript conservation

Shaykh Ahmad al-Amini in the manuscript safe room of Amir al-Mu'minin Library.



Notes

1. Mustafa Jawad, *Al-najaf qadiman* (Beirut, 1987), p. 10.

2. Salah Mahdi al-Fartusi, *Marqad wa darih amir al-mu'minin* (Najaf, 2010), p. 49.

3. Fartusi, *Marqad*, chs 2–4.

4. J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in pre-Islamic times* (London, 1979), pp. 156–57, 227; and J. M. Fiey, *Jalons pour une histoire de l'Église en Iraq* (Paris, 1970), vol. 3, pp. 203–30.

5. Dates given in this dual form refer first to the Islamic, or Hijri, calendar, then to the common era (CE) datings.

6. Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, trans. J. C. Broadhurst (London, 2008), p. 220.

7. Ibn Battutah, *The Travels of Ibn Battutah*, ed. Tim Mackintosh-Smith (London, 2002), p. 86.

8. 'Abbas Al-'Azzawi, *Tarikh al-'iraq bayna ihtilalayn* (Baghdad, 1935), vol.2, p. 240.

9. 'Azzawi, vol. 4, pp. 36–37.

10. Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran, 1785–1906: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif., 1969), pp. 42–48 and 167.

11. Yitzhak Nakkash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, N.J., 1994).

12. Guy Le Strange, *Baghdad during the Abbasid Caliphate* (New York, 2011), pp. 48–50.

13. Fartusi, p. 213.

14. 'Azzawi, vol. 2, p. 240; Fartusi, p. 222; and Su'ad Mahir, *Mashhad al-imam 'Ali fi al-Najaf wa-ma bihi min al-hadayia w'al-tuhaf* (Cairo, 1969), p. 133.

15. Fartusi, pp. 227–29.

16. Fartusi, pp. 233–36.

17. Twelver or Imami Shi'ism is the largest branch of Shi'i Islam, today found mostly in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Azerbaijan, India, Pakistan and Lebanon. Its adherents believe in twelve divinely ordained and infallible imams who are the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and his cousin and son-in-law 'Ali, who is the first imam. The Isma'ili or Sevener Shi'is developed a somewhat different doctrine after the death of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq in 756 CE and acknowledged the imamate of Isma'il and the presence of a living imam for every generation. The Bohras, often called Dawoodi Bohras, represent a branch of Isma'ilism that traces its belief system back to Yemen where it evolved under the Fatimid Caliphate (925-1170). In the sixteenth century CE, the Bohra leadership moved to India, where most of its adherents are now located. Zaydis, also known as Fivers, represent a very early school of Shi'ism named after Zayd Ibn 'Ali, the grandson of al-Husayn Ibn 'Ali. They share with Imami Shi'is the belief in the first three imams but diverge from them after that, both in the line of legitimate succession and in the nature of later imams. According to Zaydis, who are now primarily concentrated in Yemen, any descendent of al-Hasan or al-Husayn can be an imam if he exhibits certain attributes of knowledge and zeal in fighting oppression.

18. Paulo G. Pinto, 'Pilgrimage, commodities and religious objectification: the making of transnational Shiism between Iran and Syria', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, no. 27, p. 109-125 (2007).

19. See note 17.

20. Muhsin al-Amin, *Autobiographie d'un clerc chiite du Jabal 'Amil*, trans. S. Mervin and H. al-Amin (Damascus, 1998), pp. 99–108.

21. Muhammad Jawad Mughniyya, *Tajarib Muhammad Jawad Mughniyya*, (Beirut, 1980), p. 38.

22. Faleh A. Jabar, *The Shi'a Movement of Iraq* (London, 2003), p. 124.

23. Yann, Richard, *Shi'ite Islam: Polity, Ideology, and Creed* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 11.

24. The most popular compendium of visitation rites is Shaykh 'Abbas al-Qummi, *Mafatih al-jinan: wa yalihi kitab al-baqiyat al-salihat* (Beirut, 2011), long known in Persian, but recently translated into Arabic.

25. Nakkash, pp. 142-43.

26. Nakkash, pp. 161–62.

27. Jabar, pp. 189–98.

28. Jabar, p. 195.

29. Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Āshūrā' in Twelver Shī'ism* (Boston, 1978).

30. Nakkash, pp. 186–87.

31. Nakkash, p. 87.

32. Much of the factual part of this chapter is based on Muhsin 'Abd al-Sahib Muzaffar, *Maqbarat al-Najaf al-kubra. Dirasat tahliliyya zamaniyya-makaniyya li-dhahirat al-dafn fi al-madina* (Amman, 2008).

Glossary

Ahl al-Bayt: Descendants of the Prophet by his daughter Fatima and his cousin and son-in-law, 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the first imam in Shi'i doctrines.

Akhbari: School of Shi'i law that follows literally the *akhbar* or *hadith* of the imams.

Arba'in: Commemoration of forty days after the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn; 20 Safar in the Hijri Calendar.

'Ashura: Commemoration of the first ten days of the month of Muharram, which witnessed the battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn.

Fatwa: A nonbinding religious ruling or opinion.

Hadith: Saying of the Prophet, transmitted down to the present day by imams, or saying of an imam.

Hawza 'ilmiyya: Literally 'territory of knowledge', a religious seminary. It also refers to the group of students and teachers.

Husayniyya: A place of worship specific to the Shi'a.

Ijtihad: Elaboration on juridical questions according to specific methods and concepts.

Isnad: Chain of authoritative sayings that leads to the words of the Prophet, his Companions, or one of the imams.

Iwan: A vaulted architectural space with an arched opening.

Madrasa: College of jurisprudence and/or dormitory for students of the *hawza*.

Majlis/majalis ta'ziya: Mourning gathering.

Marja': A religious leader who acts as a reference point for believers following his religious precepts and *fatwas*.

Marja'iyya: Institution materializing and organizing the religious authority in Twelver/Imami Shi'i Islam.

Mihrab: A niche in a mosque, oriented towards Mecca.

Minbar: A pulpit in a mosque or shrine that is used by the imam giving the Friday sermon.

Naqib al-Ashraf: Representative of the urban notables.

Radud: Cantor chanting recitations at burials or *majalis ta'ziya*.

Sadin: Custodian of a holy shrine.

Sayyid: Descendant of the Prophet, either a layman or a cleric. The only nobility in Islam.

Shafa'a: Intercession, or supplication to God through a prophet, imam or saint.

Shaykh: Title for a cleric or a tribal leader.

Shubbak: The grilled enclosure surrounding the cenotaph of a Shi'i imam.

Sirdab (from Persian *Sardab* = cold water): Basement in a house, or crypt in a cemetery.

Suq: Market.

Tashbih/Tashabih: Public passion plays conducted during 'Ashura.

Turba: A tablet, usually made of clay from Karbala, upon which the Shi'a place their foreheads during prayer.

Usuli: The rational trend in Shi'i law; *usuli* jurists practise *ijtihad*.

Waqf: Financial endowment dedicated in perpetuity to a charitable or pious purpose.

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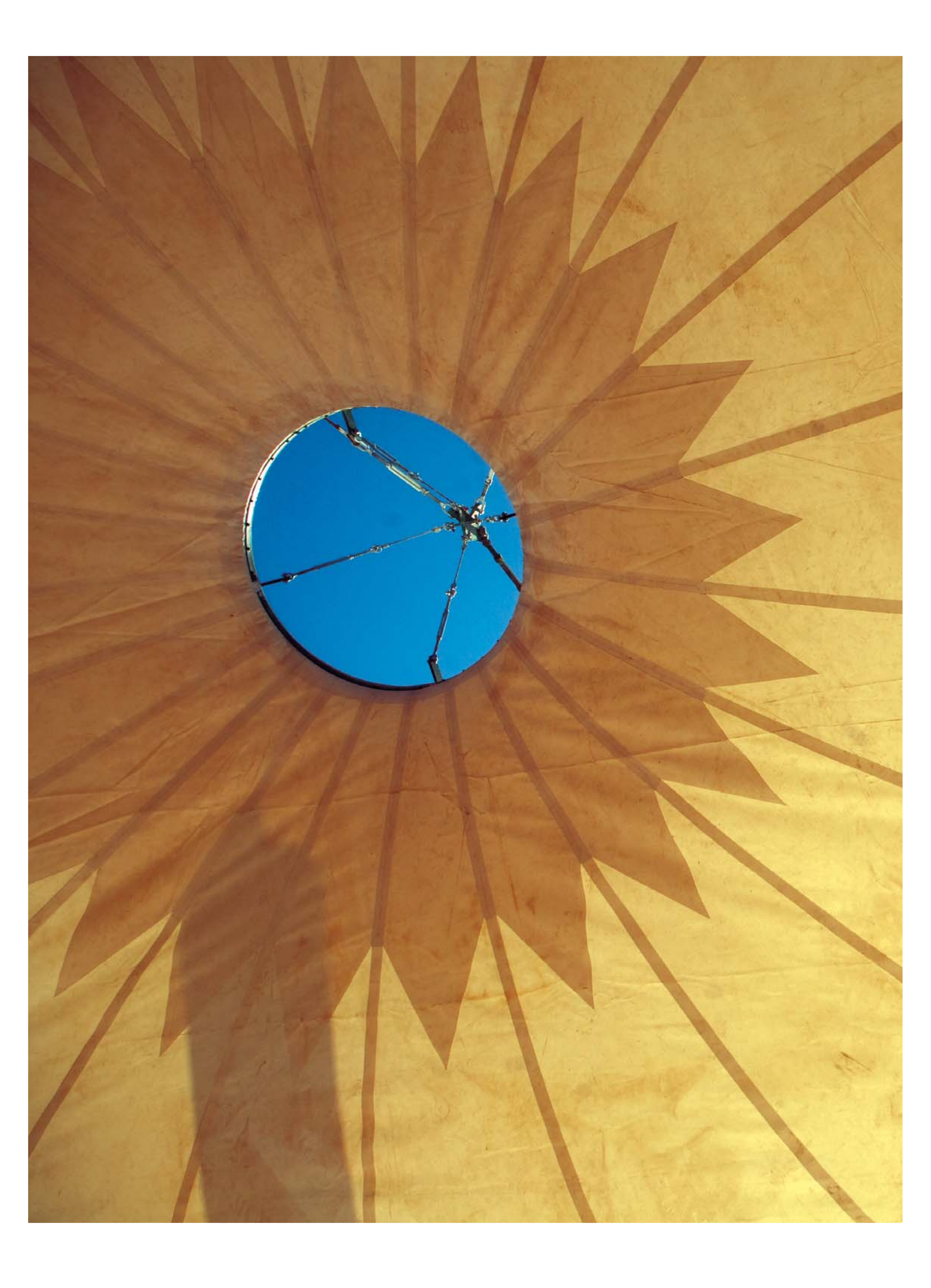


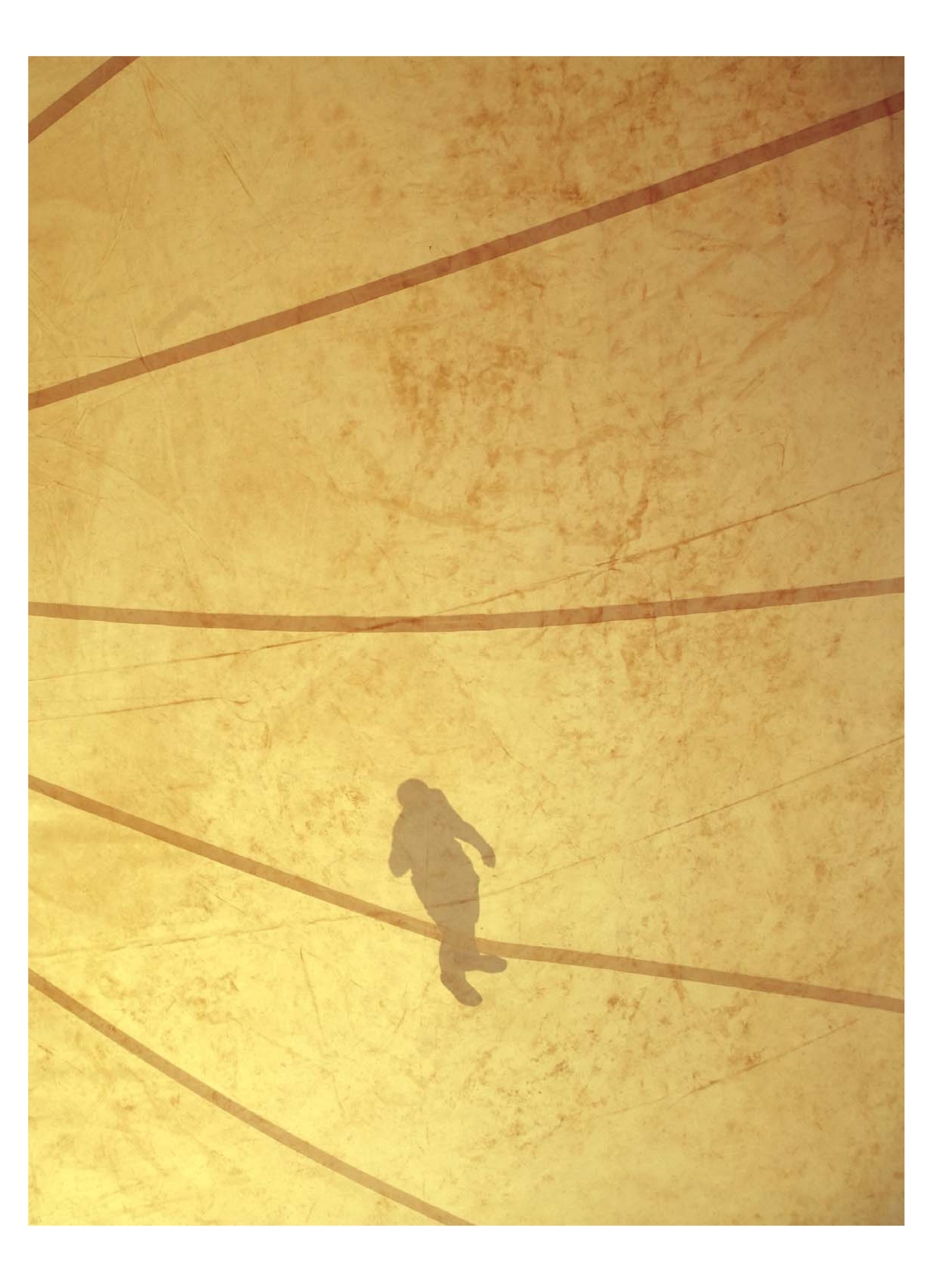
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Najaf
The Gate of Wisdom

Najaf: The Gate of Wisdom is an introduction to one of the world's most sacred cities, illustrated with over 120 specially commissioned photographs and written by authors with first-hand experience of the city. The resting place of Imam 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib – considered by Shi'i Islam the rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad – Najaf is endowed with a unique spiritual significance for millions of Muslims.

This book traces the city's history to the present day by surveying its urban form and major religious monuments, and offering vivid portraits of its people. It also provides insight into Shi'i rituals from pilgrimages to passion plays and funerals in the cemetery of Wadi al-Salam, and explains Najaf's role as a centre of learning and religious authority.

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Cover photo:
Grandiose mirror mosaics at Al-Ra's Mosque (shrine of Imam 'Ali, Najaf)

With the support of

Republic of Iraq
Ministry of Culture

UNESCO
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